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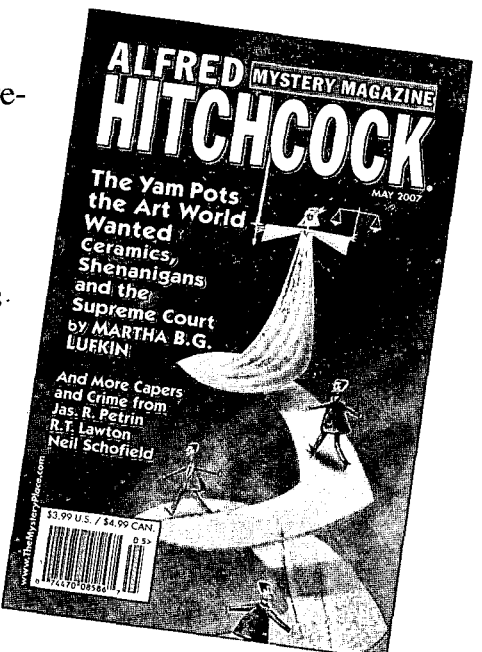

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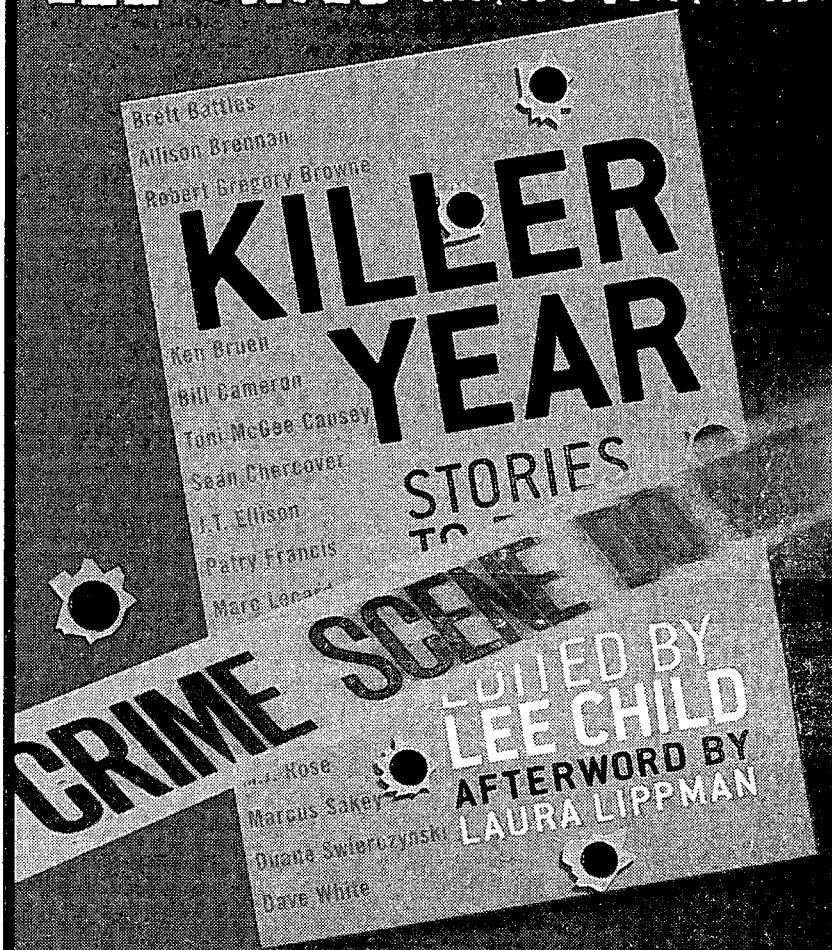

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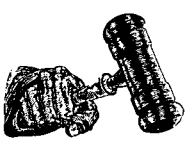

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MICHELLE

by Marilyn Todd

What struck Wilfie was the silence. That incredible, beautiful, absolute silence, and, as he lay on his back, his face and torso swaddled beneath a stiff cocoon of bandages with his left foot up in traction, he wallowed in its splendour. This was the first time in weeks—months—when he could hear nothing but the sound of his own blood pounding through his temples. Could actually listen to his own voice for once, humming in his ears.

Mademoiselle from Armentières, parlez-vous—

He was out of tune (as usual), but who cared? There was only him to criticize.

—inky, pinky, parlez-vous.

What did that mean, he wondered? That *inky pinky* stuff? Maybe if he'd been in France for more than a few months he'd understand, but right now Wilfie was happy to overlook the harness that bound him flat and bask in the luxury of painkillers and silence.

Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile—

Who wouldn't smile, he thought. Ever since Lord Kitchener's finger pointed at him from that poster, telling Wilfie "Your country needs YOU!" his eardrums had been bombarded with the din from

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the barrack room, the clack of rifle practice, the clatter of the trains that carried him to war. And then, if it wasn't the blast of the artillery or the pounding of the grenades, it was screaming, groaning, sobbing, praying, or else it was the rain. The endless bloody freezing rain that turned the fields of Flanders into mud. Rancid, slippery, endless, dripping off the barbed wire, dripping off his nose. Night or day, the racket never stopped. The bark of orders. The whistle of gas canisters fizzing through the air. The whinnies of a thousand terrified horses . . .

It's a long way to Tipperary—

But now. Now Wilfie could enjoy the quietude, safe in the knowledge that he wasn't being shot at. Wasn't having to walk upright through a hail of bullets, stumbling over twitching bodies, slipping on someone's guts and trying not to cry. Here he could relax. Lie still. Drink in every silent second—

"Wilfie?"

Jerked from his indulgence, Wilfie tried to place the voice.

"Wilfie Baines, by God, it *is* you inside that white marshmallow!"

"Ron?"

Nah. Ron had had a leg blown off when the ammunitions store went up, and that must have been—ooh, a month ago at least. That's right, he remembered now. That was a name from the past, he had thought, hearing how they'd carted him off to some posh joint that had been turned into a field hospital. Some château well clear of the front, where the seriously injured could be cared for, until they were fit enough to be sent back home to Engl . . . *Shit.*

"Now, you behave yourself, Ron Tyler," a female voice castigated, except there was no malice in her Irish lilt. To Wilfie's ears, it sounded more like laughter. "Anything you need, you ring the bell this time, you understand?"

"Yes, Sister."

"And don't you patronise me, either. I won't have you careering round these corridors by yourself. You're dangerous on wheels."

"No, Sister."

"Oh, you!" With a good-humoured tut, her stout nursing shoes clacked off. "And mind you don't tire my patient, either," she called out. "The boy needs rest!"

"I'm blind, aren't I?" Wilfie said.

Marilyn Todd writes mysteries set in various historical periods; one of them, a short story entitled "Distilling the Truth," set in 1950s France (and published in *EQMM*), was recently selected for the *Best British Mysteries 2006*. Ms. Todd has also been dazzling readers with her new series set in Ancient Greece. A first novel-length entry in that series, *Blind Eye*, is just out from Severn House. †

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Ron cleared his throat. "Your face is burned up pretty bad and the blast from the explosion knocked you back so hard you broke your leg and fractured a few ribs, but otherwise it's not too serious."

"No?" Trust Ron to play it down. "Then what am I doing here?"

"You're alive, Wilf. That has to count for something."

Did it? Did it really? Suddenly, silence was no longer Wilfie's friend.

"Here, on your medical chart I see it reads *Corporal* Baines," Ron said. "Well done, mate!"

Wilfie grunted. He was burned, blind, might never walk again, and then only with a limp, so what the hell did making corporal matter? Especially since Ron had made lieutenant, and you didn't make that simply from being the last man in your unit left alive.

"How come they haven't shipped you home?" he asked.

"Ach, you know how it is." Ron clucked his tongue. "They took my left leg off at the knee after the accident, but then gangrene set in, so they've taken my right foot away to join it. Still." He let out a wry chuckle. "Never was much of a dancer, me."

Not true, Wilfie thought. Ron had always been a smooth mover, the sort who could glide effortlessly across a ballroom. Whereas he was always stepping on some poor girl or other's toe, making her snap at him and glower. But no girls ever jumped down Ronald Tyler's throat, Wilfie remembered enviously. Not on the dance floor, not anywhere else.

"It must bother you, though. Not being able to—y'know."

"Walk? Not really." Ron's knuckles cracked. "I mean, obviously I'd rather I had both my legs, who wouldn't? But war's war, isn't it? My lungs haven't been scoured with mustard gas so bad that I can barely breathe, and I could have lost my hands—"

"No, I meant . . . attracting women."

Just look at him. I mean, who'd want to take on a soldier invalided home with a limp, crinkled skin, and who couldn't bloody see?

"Well, the way I look at it is this." Ron rolled and lit a cigarette, then pressed it between Wilfie's lips. "With every bloke under thirty over here in uniform, there'll be thousands of jobs just begging to be filled back home. Being disabled won't matter with a desk job, and you know what I've been thinking of doing, Wilf? Teaching."

"You? A teacher?" Wilfie laughed, even though he knew Ron would make a good one. He had the patience, him. When they were kids, kicking a football up and down the same street of terraced houses and climbing trees together on the common, Ron was the one who always took the younger ones aside and showed them how to bake their conkers, roll their marbles, how to learn from their mistakes.

"If not, I'll try the banks," Ron was saying, "because either way, the money's good, they're respectable positions, and—well, let's just say you don't need to worry about me not being able to find myself a wife and raising a batch of screaming nippers."

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No, *he* wouldn't, Wilfie thought. But he was thinking of his own chances.

"Lieutenant Tyler, I swear by Almighty God you'll be the death of me!" The cigarette was whisked out of Wilfie's mouth by a hand that smelled of disinfectant. "If Dr. Mallory finds you two have been smoking in the rooms, he'll have my guts for garters, so he will!"

"Sorry, Sister."

"Aye, you sound it, too," she laughed, and although she was plumping Wilfie's pillows, he knew it was Ron those Irish eyes were smiling at. "You said you were wanting to cheer the patient up, Ron Tyler, not set fire to his bed, now away with you and let the poor boy sleep."

Patient? Boy? To her, Wilfie was nothing more than another brick baking in the kiln of convalescence and she hadn't even bothered to learn his bloody name. He could understand it, he supposed. Hundreds of wounded soldiers passed through these disinfected portals, but even so. She'd not only called Ron by his full name, she'd used his rank as well—

"Help, somebody help," Ron cried, as Sister wheeled his chair away. "I'm being kidnapped!"

"Fat lot of good it'd do me, holding you to ransom," she joked back. "Your family's as poor as blooming church mice!"

As their banter faded, Wilfie felt the emptiness creep up on him. Slowly, silently, it began pressing on his bandages, crushing down his spirit and suffocating his hopes.

And the worst part was, he couldn't even cry.

"So what's it like, this château, then?" he asked, as Ron sneaked him another cigarette. "Is it all slate roofs, lakes, and turrets, like the one we saw outside that village where we were billeted the first few nights after we arrived? Ven— Verr—'" He could never pronounce these flaming words.

"Vézières," Ron said, without stumbling. "And it's not only like that château, mate, it *is* that château. All crystal candelabra, the sort of place where you can't see the wood panelling for tapestries and the ceilings are so high, giraffes wouldn't brush against them. You know, I bet these paintings cost a pretty penny, too."

"Stuff 'em," Wilfie said. "Stuff the sodding lot of them."

What use was posh furniture when he couldn't bloody see it? So what if the silk hangings could be removed, washed, and then rehung again? And who bloody cared whether the bed was Louis ex-one-vee or ex-vee-one when you were strapped to it night and bloody day?

The length of the pause suggested he'd put his foot in it again, and Wilfie felt bad about it, he really did. Apart from Ron's visits, time hung and wouldn't pass. The doctor's calls were brief and far too impersonal for Wilfie's liking, and worse, the snotty sod talked

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over him, as though Wilfie was deaf, as well as swaddled like a mummy. Even the nurses who flittered in and out to change his dressings and refresh his bedpans were too busy to stop and chat. There were far worse injuries than his, they'd tell him briskly, and remind him that he could at least feel the discomfort, which was more than could be said for those poor souls down there in the morgue. The trouble was, Wilfie was too proud to say outright that he was grateful to Ron for wheeling himself along when Sister's back was turned. But truly, if it hadn't been for him, he'd have gone stark, staring mad, and in any case, the poor sod was only trying to cheer him up. And it wasn't exactly a picnic for him, either. Losing one leg, then a foot, what a bugger that was. The trouble was, Wilfie wasn't the type who could just say "Sorry" and forget it, and, unlike Ron, he wasn't good at making conversation. Never knew what to say that didn't come out wrong.

"Hey, Wilf, guess what?" He should have remembered. Ron never took offence. "You know that girl we used to see cycling round Vézières?" There was genuine excitement in his voice. "The one that fancied you?"

"The ginger one with fat thighs?" Wilfie said, because to the best of his recollection none of them had looked twice at him, not even the fat one.

"No, no, no. The little blonde who worked in the baker's."

"Think so," Wilfie lied. "Wore glasses, didn't she?"

"If she did, I never saw them, but the point is, she's outside, my old mucker. Feeding the sparrows on the lawn not fifty feet from your bedroom window."

Oh. For some reason Wilfie imagined he'd be on one of the upper stories, floating in the air in his fairytale castle. Not wedged like a sack of coals in some dark corner on the ground floor. But yeah, it made sense, he supposed. They'd want to protect his lower-class blood from staining their precious oak parquet, or make sure his working-class vowels didn't shock the ghosts that drifted so genteelly round the West Wing.

"Here, are you listening, Prince Charming? I said, she's waving at you. Not that I can make out what she's saying through the glass—"

"Then open the bloody window," Wilfie snapped.

"Ah, but then I'd need a jemmy and they're not hospital issue," Ron laughed. "All the windows have been nailed shut. Keeps the germs out, apparently."

More likely to keep the burglars out, Wilfie thought sourly.

"But let's see if we can't improve on the situation, shall we." The wheels on Ron's chair proclaimed a desperate need for grease as he scraped his way across the room towards the window. "That's better. We're talking with our hands and reading one another's lips. She says her name's Michelle. She's asking how you're doing, so I said you're feeling a bit down in the dumps—"

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"What the bloody hell did you tell her that for?"

"—so she said she'll drop by again tomorrow, if that's all right with you." There was a pause. "Well, is it?"

Was it! "Suppose so," Wilfie said.

And all night he couldn't sleep for trying to picture the baker's shop with the petite blonde behind the counter who may or may not have been wearing glasses, but for the life of him he just *couldn't* place her face. By the time dawn was glowing warm through his pyjamas, he realised he'd been picturing the wrong flaming baker's shop, hadn't he! It would have been the other one she worked in. The one behind the ironmonger's, not the one opposite the church!

Wilfie was always getting things bloody wrong.

In fact, that's what got him in this mess in the first place. He was sloppy. Always had been. He'd lose concentration at a critical moment, and that's when mistakes happened. He didn't mean them to, of course. But somehow his mind would get distracted, or he couldn't quite remember, especially when he was under pressure, just what it was that he was supposed to do. Was it that you had to press this lever, or not *ever* press the flaming thing? Clockwise or counter-clockwise to twizzle that red knob?

All that drilling, all that training, and he *still* got things back to front.

Like that sodding grenade. Hung on to it too long, it blew up as he was throwing it. He was lucky. It could have literally blown up in his face. And even luckier that there was no one else around. He could have killed someone with his carelessness that time. But of course, if there was no one else around, there was no one else to blame, and now Wilfie'd be a laughingstock again, he really would. So he supposed that was at least something to be grateful for. Not having to go back and face his regiment.

Watch out, boys, here comes Butterfingers Baines,
Drops his blooming ammo box time and time again.
Don't stand behind him, boys, when he's pointing a gun,
You're better off standing right in front and take your chances with the Hun.

Ha-bloody-ha, very funny, too. But it wasn't simply the humiliation. He'd got used to that. No, the thing was, Wilfie'd really like to get things right for once. To not screw up.

And this Michelle . . .

It was such a pretty name.

"Describe her to me, Ron."

"A*gain?*"

"I want to get the picture right inside my head." Before the memories of real life faded, and before colours turned to black.

"Well, it's hard to tell exactly, but I reckon she'd come up to

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about here on you." Ron drew a line at the top of Wilfie's shoulder. "She's slim, but not too skinny. Blonde, like I said, with curls piled up on top that catch the sunlight when she turns, and very fresh looking, with big blue eyes and a lovely smile, and I'll bet her skin's as soft as silk, you lucky dog."

"Michelle." Wilfie rolled her name around on his tongue. Michelle. Michelle. Michelle. "And it's been how many days now she's come to see me?"

"Six."

"Including Sunday." Wilfie had heard the church bells. Faint, but unmistakable. "So we can safely say she's not the religious type." He smiled. "That's encouraging."

"So's seeing a grin on that face of yours—hey, what's the matter?"

"Well, that's the trouble, isn't it. My face." The smile had dropped as quickly as it appeared. "Right now, this Michelle feels sorry for me. Stuck in hospital, wrapped in bandages, it brings out the best in girls like her. But she won't want me once I've been discharged, Ron. Blind, limping—" (Say it, Wilfie. Say it!) "—ugly."

"Give over, you've always been ugly," Ron shot back, and Wilfie laughed as well. "But I reckon you're wrong about Michelle. She doesn't strike me as the sorry-for-you type. I mean, remember how she used to glance over her shoulder at you as she cycled through the village?"

"She did?"

"Oh, come on, don't tell me you've forgotten how she used to suddenly have this urgent need to adjust her heels every time you passed her in the street? Or drop her handkerchief, or walk that silly dog of hers just when you happened to be in the neighbourhood."

"Honest to God, Ron, I don't remember any of it."

Pretty girls just didn't do that. Not for Wilfie. Not that he *was* ugly or anything. It was just that he was nothing special, him. So he'd keep his head down, scowling, hands stuffed in his pockets, and pretend he didn't care. But . . . well, well, well.

All this time, and he hadn't even realised!

"She left a letter, shall I read it?"

"Well, I bloody can't, now can I?" But for once there was no bitterness in Wilfie's voice. "What does it say?"

"It says—" With a theatrical cough, Ron cleared his throat. "—*Mon cher Wilfie, je tu souhaite un prompt rétablissement, et j'attends avec intérêt de toi rencontrer, quand tu es assez bien,* and it's signed Michelle." Ron pushed the paper into his hand. "In other words, she—"

"Hey, I'm not stupid! I don't need you to bloody translate it for me!"

"Sorry."

"So you bloody should be."

There was an awkward silence in which Wilfie wished he'd bitten

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off his tongue, but then Ron said he had to rush, the doctor was doing his evaluation any minute, though he'd be back for when Michelle dropped by this afternoon. But Wilfie wasn't listening. He was too busy sniffing the letter, which smelled of disinfectant, but then it would. Everything that came into contact with this place did, and they'd probably made her wipe her hands before letting her pass it over! He waited until the squeak of the wheelchair had faded out of earshot, then called an orderly.

"Don't suppose you could get this translated for me, could you, mate?"

"Tell me again what her letter says," he asked Ron that afternoon.

Apparently, orderlies were too busy to do blind corporals any favours. Hardly took a glance at it, the lazy sod, and he was stuffing it back in Wilfie's hand, trotting out more excuses than you could shake a stick at. Well, sod him, Wilfie thought, and it wasn't as if he hadn't offered to bloody pay him for it, either.

But as usual, Ron didn't mind a bit, and Wilfie decided he really would make a damn good teacher. He had patience, did Ron.

"Your lovely Michelle wishes you a speedy recovery, and looks forward to meeting you once you're well enough." Ron chuckled. "Looks forward, you notice, Wilf. Now, does that sound the type of girl who's going to drop you once you're up and running? I tell you, mate, she's smitten with you—and ho, ho, ho, talk of the devil. Guess who's walking up the path towards a certain young man's window at this very minute?"

Wilfie felt his heart pounding. "What's she wearing? Is it that white blouse and pale grey skirt again?"

Ron had described it to him in exquisite detail. The way the breeze would ruffle the lace around her collar. The way that single slit in the back of her skirt made it swish this way and that, to reveal her shapely ankles. The brooch she always wore at her neck, in the shape of a flying swan.

"Tell me how she walks, Ron."

He loved to hear about her. Every tiny detail. The long, slim fingers that spoke so eloquently through the glass panes that separated them. The eagerness in her wide, blue eyes as she drank in everything about Wilfie's family, the neighbourhood he grew up in, his friends, even his dreary old labouring job.

Michelle . . .

Michelle didn't care that he hadn't amounted to anything, but with her, anything was possible. For a start, with her, he wouldn't be so clumsy. She'd be there to help him and support him, and that was what had been missing in his life. The love of a good woman. My oh my, how he used to laugh at that old chestnut! Talk about corny, he would scoff. Oh yeah? Well, he wasn't scoffing now. It was early days, of course, and he wouldn't dare tell Ron, but—don't

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laugh—Wilfie thought he might, just might, be in love.

"Dr. Mallory reckons I should retain partial sight in my right eye, what do you think of that, eh, Ron?"

And the news just kept on getting better. Tomorrow he'd be out of traction and soon he would be able to hop over to the window by himself. He had no idea what kind of sign language crutches were likely to communicate, but the thought of waving them like semaphore made him laugh so hard that the night sister feared he'd taken some kind of fit.

And maybe he had, at that.

Daft, wasn't it, he thought? Him a half-blind, limping invalid, her all cool and elegant, but don't they say that opposites attract?

"Ask her . . . ask her how she feels about living in England."

The answer, apparently, was a shrug, but it was accompanied by a coy smile.

"But she's blushing, right?"

"Very becomingly, in my opinion, Wilf." Ron clapped him on the shoulder. "You're onto a winner, there, my boy."

Oh, yes indeed. Michelle obviously liked what she saw even back when he was stationed in the village, although he wished now he hadn't been so bloody sullen. Lack of confidence was all it was, but suddenly, with Michelle, Wilfie realised that he wouldn't need to play the tough guy anymore. She was the kind of girl who could see through a chap's insecurities and just let him be himself, and for that he loved her, yes, he did and—there. He'd said it. *Wilfie Baines loves Michelle.*

Crumbs. Who ever would have thought it! He lay awake all night thinking it was all very well passing messages to Ron to signal through the window, but what would he actually say to her when they finally met up? What would her hand feel like closed inside both of his, he wondered. How would her hair smell when he buried his face in it? Would it be warm and yeasty, from working so close to the ovens? Or would it be dusty with flour from the loaves, tickling his nose and making him sneeze? By the time the first cup of morning tea was making its wobbly way towards his mouth, he was picturing their initials carved in the trunk of the old plane tree where she came to feed the sparrows.

W♥M

It might be a little premature, but Wilfie couldn't help wondering where a man could buy engagement rings round here.

What Wilfie hadn't bargained for, of course, was being moved. That between having his leg seen to, and then his ribs, then his burns and eyes sorted out, several days would pass. But at least it was still good news.

"Exactly as I told you," the surgeon said. "A clean and simple

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leg break."

Six weeks and Wilfie would be running for the bus again, he quipped, and Wilfie could not believe his luck.

"I thought this place was for the seriously injured?"

"We don't have time to classify the maimed, Corporal." The surgeon had already lost interest in his patient. "I'm just grateful to see you boys leave here alive, now who's next on the list, please, nurse?"

Wilfie tried to think who it was who'd told him about this place, but then how often had the bloke beside you told you something, and by the time it reached the far end of the trench, the meaning had changed out of all recognition? Getting signals crossed was par for the course around here, and all that mattered was that Wilfie's luck was changing.

"Mademoiselle from Armentières, parlez-vous—"

"Oi!" somebody yelled. "Would someone put that flaming cat outside?"

Wilfie grinned and gave him a cheerful V-sign. *"—inky-pinky, parlez-vous."*

Funnier things had happened at sea, he thought, but he had a feeling that hanging on to that grenade was Wilfie's lucky day. Had he thrown it properly, he wouldn't have found Michelle, he wouldn't have run into his old school friend, hell, he might even be dead by now. Another lump of meat, bloating in the mud, trampled down by scores of frightened boots.

Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile—

"There you go, soldier. Put these drops in your eye three times a . . ."

Wilfie was only half listening, though, because suddenly the world was a completely different place. He could see, he could see, and all right, his left eye was still covered by a patch and the right was weak and blurry, but as he was surrounded by daylight, faces, colours for the first time in God knows how long, Wilfie remembered hangovers that had left him with worse vision than this. He could see and he was free, and were it not for that stupid leg in plaster, he'd have clicked both heels together in the air.

"Excuse me," he asked one of the porters. "Do you know where I can find Lieutenant Tyler? He's an amputee—"

"Ronnie?" The porter stood his empty stretcher upright and used it as a prop. "What a character, that boy, eh?" He sighed. "I mean, we all know what he did to earn that promotion to lieutenant, and he'll get a medal for diving forward to push three men out of the way when that ammunitions store went up, but to listen to him, you'd never think he was a cripple, would you?"

"No. No, you wouldn't."

"That lad'll have the same nightmares that you and all them other poor sods'll have, probably for the rest of your lives, you poor old buggers, but does our Ronnie let it show? Not him, and that's

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the point, innit? It's all a question of attitude, and I'll bet you're right proud to call that lad your friend."

"I am." He was.

"Anyway." The porter picked up his bloodstained stretcher. "Up them stairs, turn right, and you can't miss him, chum. Just watch for the gaggle of hens clucking over him!"

"Thanks."

Hobbling through the crush of haemorrhaging humanity, joggled by muddy uniforms, shattered gas masks, and all the other horrors that he'd shoved to the back of his mind while he'd been wrapped up in his silent, white cocoon, Wilfie was suddenly gripped by a cold, hard rush of fear that made him stumble. Panic gripped him. He was slipping in the mud again, choking on cordite while cannons roared and bullets pinged around him He could hear the soft hiss of canisters of death. The crackle of machine-gun fire. The screams of men cut to ribbons on barbed wire—

Then snap and it was gone. Over as quickly as it started, and although his skin was cold with sweat, it wasn't out of fear. Lying bandaged to the gills, Wilfie hadn't stopped to think about it, but now it dawned on him that these injuries, however minor, still meant he'd never be sent back to the front, and Ron was right. He was alive and yes, it *did* bloody count for something. War was not the Great Adventure that was being played out in the newspapers at home. It wasn't over quickly, as the pundits had predicted; in fact, this filthy war was claiming more young lives than ever, and in the vilest of ways. Wilfie only had to look around to see that he was one of the lucky ones, and it came as quite a shock to realise that the bitterness and rancour that had been eating him before was gone.

He felt different, suddenly. Lighter. As though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders and a whole new world was opening up before him. A fresher, cleaner world, full of opportunities, and he no longer felt ground down with envy, either. Sure, Ron had brains and looks and charm. All the things Wilfie didn't have and frankly never would, but surprisingly it didn't matter anymore. For the first time, Wilfie had someone in his life who wanted him. Who accepted him for who and what he was, with neither criticism or judgment. Today—today, from this day forward and in sickness and in health, was the start of a new life. . . .

It wasn't easy, shambling up the crowded stairs with blurred vision and a crutch, but even so, Wilfie could see the château steps had class. He couldn't tell whether they were stone or marble, but whichever, he couldn't help but admire the big, wide sweep. To be honest, he'd suspected Ron had been pulling his leg about the tapestries and pictures hanging on the walls. Wilfie thought they'd have been removed at the outset of the fighting, but perhaps there wasn't time to take them down, or maybe looting was the least of these Frenchies' worries. Either way, though, he was glad. Wilfie

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couldn't tell his Titian from his elbow, but he'd bet his last pack of fags that Ron would know who'd painted what, and fancy being able to tell his mum he'd seen a real, live Rembrandt!

It's a long way to Tipperary—

Yep. Ron might have the brains, the looks, the charm, but Wilfie was in love. In unconditional, thrilling, can't-sleep-for-thinking-about-her love, and it wouldn't be long now before he got to meet Michelle and hold her hands in his, perhaps stand beneath the ancient plane tree and bury his face in her gorgeous, soft blond hair.

"—it's a long way to go—"

But first, yes, first he had to set things right. Throughout Ron's visits—visits which, quite honestly, were the only things that kept him sane—he'd been obsessed with nothing other than his own injuries. Now admittedly he hadn't known it at the time, but they were trivial, especially compared to Ron's, and it was high time he said the things he'd been too proud to say before. Words like sorry, thank you, and, who knows, maybe even owning up that he couldn't speak a word of French needed to be aired. No call to make a song and dance of it, just a few words, man to man, to set the record straight. As he approached Ron, engulfed by hordes of laughing staff, Wilfie knew that, wheelchair or not, he really *wouldn't* have any trouble finding himself a wife. It was exactly as the porter said. A question of attitude, and he had Ron to thank for his. That grenade might not have killed him, Wilfie reflected happily, but Ron had surely saved his life. Him, and his sweet Michelle.

"Ron?"

Oh, wasn't that just his luck? The minute he opened his mouth, some bloody bell goes off and drowns him out, and suddenly nurses, orderlies, doctors, the lot, were rushing off in all directions to attend to this latest crisis on the battlefield.

And that's when Wilfie saw her. Blond hair, swirled up and round on top, it couldn't be anyone else. Even with his fuzzy vision, how could he miss that long grey skirt and lacy blouse, and though he couldn't quite make it out from here, he'd bet his pocket watch that that brooch glinting at her neck was a swan in flight.

"Michelle!" His heart was pounding. *"Michelle!"*

She couldn't hear above the piercing shrill, so he waved his crutch, and it was due to the combination of excitement and fighting to stay upright that he hadn't quite realised what he'd been looking at.

Where all the other staff had rushed away, Michelle remained beside Ron's chair. She was laughing—so help him, he could see her white teeth shining when she tipped her head back—and then bending down to whisper in Ron's ear.

Nah. Don't be daft, Wilfie told himself. Of course she'd have to lean down close, he couldn't hear her otherwise, could he? Not with this flaming racket going on. All the same, he stopped. Watched while she ruffled Ron's hair with genuine affection. While

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she laughed again, in the way that only close friends do. And when she walked away, Wilfie watched the slit in her skirt swishing this way and that, to reveal her shapely ankles.

Stop it. Stop it, Wilfie, don't do this. They're friends. Good pals, that's all, and what do you expect after all that signalling through the bloody window? It's you she wrote to, remember? You she came to see each day, and you, Wilfred Herbert Baines, that she wanted to hear about, not Ron, so don't you go making a damn fool of yourself. Not this time. You've screwed up enough already in your life, so you get this bloody right for once.

But then it happened. As Michelle strode off down the corridor, she turned and glanced at Ron over her shoulder. Not a quick glance, either. A direct and lingering look, probably the very one she'd given Wilfie when she cycled through the village. Except this time there was someone to acknowledge her. Someone to wave back . . .

Oh, yes, Ronnie Tyler had the lot. Courage, brains, good looks, and charm; he was popular with both sexes of all ages, and could have any girl he wanted.

Yet the minute Wilfie's back was turned, he'd stolen his.

In the end, it was very simple. Everyone had gone, even Michelle, God love her, and the corridor and the stairs were deathly quiet. Only Wilfie, Ron, and the ghosts that stalked the château stayed, frozen in some kind of limbo in which the passage of time was marked by dust motes dancing in the air.

"Wilf!" Ron turned, his mouth breaking into a grin. "Congratulations, mate! Wasn't expecting you back until tomorrow."

"So I gather," he growled, knocking the brake off the wheelchair with his crutch.

"Look, Ma," Ron laughed, throwing both arms in the air as Wilfie gave the chair a good, hard shove. "No hands!"

The stairs were stone.

The drop was steep.

Those were the last words that Ronnie Tyler ever spoke.

And the weird thing was, Wilfie didn't even feel bad about it. Like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, he'd broken free of his cocoon, and he didn't mean his bandages. The clumsy, sloppy, sullen Wilfie had emerged into a poised and confident individual, and ironic as it was that Ron had been responsible for that transformation, you can't go round stealing a man's only chance of happiness and not expect to pay the price.

Wilfie didn't blame Michelle for what had happened, how could he? She'd never even met him, and even though he'd only been gone a day or two, this was war, where time was measured on a different scale, and in any case Ron could charm the birds down from the trees.

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"Oh, fancy, would you look at that!"

He couldn't make out sister's expression as she ran towards the jumble of twisted metal at the bottom of the staircase. But Wilfie could hear the sorrow in her voice.

"I told him," she sniffed. "I told him time and time again not to go wheeling himself about on his own, and now look what you've done, Ronnie Tyler! You've gone and killed yourself, you silly fool."

See? Even in a place that was hardened to tragedy and carnage, Ron was still their darling. But what the hell. Wilfie let him have his triumph, and why not. He couldn't say whether he and Michelle would make it as a team, it was still very early days, but he didn't see why not. Because while Wilfie could never be a teacher (and nothing in the world would keep him stuck inside a bloody bank all day), Michelle worked in a bread shop, didn't she? Who better to teach him shopkeeping skills, and what was to stop them from opening their own little baker's shop back home?

He would love her, cherish her, devote his whole life to her if she would only let him, because this was the new Wilfie now. Hadn't he already proved that he was no longer that sloppy worker who lost his concentration? It was a pity, in a way, that he could never tell her that he hadn't just committed murder, he had committed the *perfect* murder. No witnesses, no weapon, no clues, no motive, it was absolutely textbook, but the point is, if a man can get away with that, he can do anything he puts his mind to.

A question of attitude, right, Ron?

He didn't wait while they untangled the body from the wheelchair and laid it on a stretcher. He needed to find Michelle. Better Wilfie broke the news than have her hear it from a stranger, but first he needed to see what kind of mangled mess she'd be confronted with. Ron might have lost his legs, he remembered sourly, but at least his face had remained intact, and though Wilfie was no coward, he didn't mind admitting that his hands were shaking as he hobbled towards the massive gilt mirror at the end of the hallway.

"Corporal Baines?"

He was so absorbed in examining the raw, red mess that was his face that he smelled her perfume before he even saw her. Jasmine, with soft hints of patchouli—and not a trace of disinfectant. And when he looked into the mirror, he saw that, yes, she did come up to about here on his shoulder, and yes again, it was a flying swan, that brooch.

"You were Lieutenant Tyler's friend—oh, I say, are you all right?"

"I—"

When she smiled, Wilfie didn't need 20-20 vision to see there was no grief clouding those heavenly big blue eyes. Only kindness and comfort shined out to him. The trouble was, in the unforgiving glare of the crystal candelabra, the strands of grey in that lovely pile of hair stood out. Hundreds, yes hundreds, of silver, glinting

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threads that were in keeping with the furrows round her eyes, the lines around her mouth, and no wonder he hadn't paid attention when she cycled round the village. Michelle was old enough to be his bloody mum.

"I'm . . . fine."

He was. Honest. Because so what that Michelle was older than Ron made out? She cared about him, didn't she? At least it wasn't the fat girl with ginger hair and thighs like tree trunks, and knocking on or not, she was a damned good-looking woman, so stop stuttering, you fool. You're the new Wilfie, remember? Strong, confident, got away with murder? Just calm down, ask her if she'd like a cup of tea, and take it from there.

Except . . .

There was something here that Wilfie couldn't quite put his finger on. Admittedly, he was so confused, so amazed, oh Christ, so bloody happy that his brain was out of focus, but something was still bugging him. Not that he might be ashamed to be seen with an older woman. Not that. Michelle was still a stunner—Shit. *A stunner who spoke English . . .*

"Are you sure you don't want me to call somebody, Corporal? You've gone terribly pale and I'm concerned about your sudden change in breathing."

Corporal. She addressed him by his rank. . . .

"You . . . You're not Michelle, are you?" The floor was spinning. He could barely gasp the words out.

"Yes, dear, I'm Mrs. Mitchell." She nodded supportively. "The hospital administrator, but if you're absolutely certain that you don't need a nurse, I'll be about my duties." Her smile was sad. "I simply wanted to offer my condolences, I know what good friends you were, and perhaps when you get home you wouldn't mind telling Ron's family how proud we were to have him with us." She ruffled Wilfie's hair affectionately. "Well, I don't need to tell you how it was, do I?"

With that she was gone, her long grey skirt swishing round her ankles, the lace at her collar ruffling in the air. At the end of the corridor, she turned to glance over her shoulder. Not a quick glance, either. A direct and lingering look. Exactly like the one Wilfie watched her giving Ron.

How many hours did he remain, slumped at the top of the marble staircase? Sunshine turned to night. The hospital went quiet. Quiet, Wilfie decided, as the grave.

This wasn't true. Michelle was real. She'd come to see him, hadn't she? Every bloody day she'd come to see him, and even if it was the fat one with ginger hair and Ron was too kind to say, so what? She'd come to visit, that's the bloody point.

But a little voice kept whispering. Whispering at him through

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the silence—

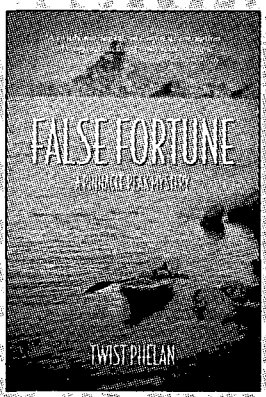
I made it up, Wilf. I only said those things to cheer you up. To give you something to focus on, when you were feeling so depressed.

No, no, she's real, Wilfie shouted inside his head. She came to feed the sparrows on the lawn outside my window.

And that's when he remembered. When they'd stretchered him away to get his leg seen to, he'd been so preoccupied with the pain searing through his ribs that he hadn't paid much attention as they bumped him down the stairs. The *stairs*, you see. Not one flight, not even two. Which meant there could not have been a lawn outside the window—

Bollocks. Get a grip. Ron could still have seen her down below, and who cares if he lied about her looks? Michelle was real and the proof was here, right here in Wilfie's pocket. Look! In the letter she had written him herself. He shuffled to the light beneath the mirror. Smelled the disinfectant on the page. The page that was blank, whichever side he turned—

In the mirror, Wilfie saw an old, old man, and the old man's face wasn't ravaged by either scars or burns, it was disfigured by loneliness and spite. And in the silence that would follow him forever, he could hear the sound of an ungreased wheel spinning slowly at the bottom of the stairs. No matter how loudly Wilfie screamed to drown it out.●



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BLACK MASK

SMART-ALECK KILL

by Raymond Chandler

We opened the Black Mask series with a Hammett reprint. We follow up here with Raymond Chandler, who is inextricably associated with his creation Philip Marlowe. Marlowe never appeared in any of Chandler's *Black Mask* stories, though when several of them were reprinted in paperback, the P.I.'s name was changed to Marlowe. In this story it's Johnny Dalmas, but he's clearly a proto-Marlowe! ¶

1.

The doorman of the Kilmarnock was six foot two. He wore a pale blue uniform, and white gloves made his hands look enormous. He opened the door of the Yellow taxi as gently as an old maid stroking a cat.

Johnny Dalmas got out and turned to the red-haired driver. He said: "Better wait for me around the corner, Joey."

The driver nodded, tucked a toothpick a little farther back in the corner of his mouth, and swung his cab expertly away from the white-marked loading zone. Dalmas crossed the sunny sidewalk and went into the enormous cool lobby of the Kilmarnock. The carpets were thick, soundless. Bellboys stood with folded arms and the two clerks behind the marble desk looked austere.

Dalmas went across to the elevator lobby. He got into a paneled car and said: "End of the line, please."

The penthouse floor had a small quiet lobby with three doors opening off it, one to each wall. Dalmas crossed to one of them and rang the bell.

Derek Walden opened the door. He was about forty-five, possibly a little more, and had a lot of powdery gray hair and a handsome, dissipated face that was beginning to go pouchy.

He had on a monogrammed lounging robe and a glass full of whiskey in his hand. He was a little drunk.

He said thickly, morosely: "Oh, it's you. C'mon in, Dalmas."

He went back into the apartment, leaving the door open. Dalmas

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shut it and followed him into a long, high-ceilinged room with a balcony at one end and a line of French windows along the left side. There was a terrace outside.

Derek Walden sat down in a brown and gold chair against the wall and stretched his legs across a footstool. He swirled the whiskey around in his glass, looking down at it.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

Dalmas stared at him a little grimly. After a moment he said: "I dropped in to tell you I'm giving you back your job."

Walden drank the whiskey out of his glass and put it down on the corner of a table. He fumbled around for a cigarette, stuck it in his mouth, and forgot to light it.

"Tha' so?" His voice was blurred but indifferent.

Dalmas turned away from him and walked over to one of the windows. It was open and an awning flapped outside. The traffic noise from the boulevard was faint.

He spoke over his shoulder: "The investigation isn't getting anywhere—because you don't want it to get anywhere. You know why you're being blackmailed. I don't. Eclipse Films is interested because they have a lot of sugar tied up in films you have made."

"To hell with Eclipse Films," Walden said, almost quietly.

Dalmas shook his head and turned around. "Not from my angle. They stand to lose if you get in a jam the publicity hounds can't handle. You took me on because you were asked to. It was a waste of time. You haven't cooperated worth a cent."

Walden said in an unpleasant tone: "I'm handling this my own way and I'm not gettin' into any jam. I'll make my own deal—when I can buy something that'll stay bought. . . . And all you have to do is make the Eclipse people think the situation's bein' taken care of. That clear?"

Dalmas came partway back across the room. He stood with one hand on top of a table, beside an ashtray littered with cigarette stubs that had very dark lip rouge on them. He looked down at these absently.

"That wasn't explained to me, Walden," he said coldly.

"I thought you were smart enough to figure it out," Walden sneered. He leaned sidewise and slopped some more whiskey into his glass. "Have a drink?"

Dalmas said: "No, thanks."

Walden found the cigarette in his mouth and threw it on the floor. He drank. "What the hell!" he snorted. "You're a private detective and you're being paid to make a few motions that don't mean anything. It's a clean job—as your racket goes."

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Dalmas said: "That's another crack I could do without hearing."

Walden made an abrupt, angry motion. His eyes glittered. The corners of his mouth drew down and his face got sulky. He avoided Dalmas's stare.

Dalmas said: "I'm not against you, but I never was for you. You're not the kind of guy I could go for, ever. If you had played with me, I'd have done what I could. I still will—but not for your sake. I don't want your money—and you can pull your shadows off my tail any time you like."

Walden put his feet on the floor. He laid his glass down very carefully on the table at his elbow. The whole expression of his face changed.

"Shadows? . . . I don't get you." He swallowed. "I'm not having you shadowed."

Dalmas stared at him. After a moment he nodded. "Okay, then. I'll backtrack on the next one and see if I can make him tell who he's working for . . . I'll find out."

Walden said very quietly: "I wouldn't do that, if I were you. You're—you're monkeying with people that might get nasty . . . I know what I'm talking about."

"That's something I'm not going to let worry me," Dalmas said evenly. "If it's the people that want your money, they were nasty a long time ago."

He held his hat out in front of him and looked at it. Walden's face glistened with sweat. His eyes looked sick. He opened his mouth to say something.

The door buzzer sounded.

Walden scowled quickly, swore. He stared down the room but did not move.

"Too damn many people come here without bein' announced," he growled. "My Jap boy is off for the day."

The buzzer sounded again, and Walden started to get up. Dalmas said: "I'll see what it is. I'm on my way anyhow."

He nodded to Walden, went down the room, and opened the door.

Two men came in with guns in their hands. One of the guns dug sharply into Dalmas's ribs, and the man who was holding it said urgently: "Back up, and make it snappy. This is one of those stick-ups you read about."

He was dark and good-looking and cheerful. His face was as clear as a cameo, almost without hardness. He smiled.

The one behind him was short and sandy-haired. He scowled. The dark one said: "This is Walden's dick, Noddy. Take him over and go through him for a gun."

The sandy-haired man, Noddy, put a short-barreled revolver against Dalmas's stomach and his partner kicked the door shut, then strolled carelessly down the room toward Walden.

Noddy took a .38 Colt from under Dalmas's arm, walked around

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him and tapped his pockets. He put his own gun away and transferred Dalmas's Colt to his business hand.

"Okay, Ricchio. This one's clean," he said in a grumbling voice. Dalmas let his arms fall, turned, and went back into the room. He looked thoughtfully at Walden. Walden was leaning forward with his mouth open and an expression of intense concentration on his face. Dalmas looked at the dark stick-up and said softly: "Ricchio?"

The dark boy glanced at him. "Over there by the table, sweetheart. I'll do all the talkin'."

Walden made a hoarse sound in his throat. Ricchio stood in front of him, looking down at him pleasantly, his gun dangling from one finger by the trigger guard.

"You're too slow on the pay-off, Walden. Too damn slow! So we came to tell you about it. Tailed your dick here too. Wasn't that cute?"

Dalmas said gravely, quietly: "This punk used to be your bodyguard, Walden—if his name is Ricchio."

Walden nodded silently and licked his lips. Ricchio snarled at Dalmas: "Don't crack wise, dick. I'm tellin' you again." He stared with hot eyes, then looked back at Walden, looked at a watch on his wrist.

"It's eight minutes past three, Walden. I figure a guy with your drag can still get dough out of the bank. We're giving you an hour to raise ten grand. Just an hour. And we're takin' your shamus along to arrange about delivery."

Walden nodded again, still silent. He put his hands down on his knees and clutched them until his knuckles whitened.

Ricchio went on: "We'll play clean. Our racket wouldn't be worth a squashed bug if we didn't. You'll play clean, too. If you don't, your shamus will wake up on a pile of dirt. Only he won't wake up. Get it?"

Dalmas said contemptuously: "And if he pays up—I suppose you turn me loose to put the finger on you."

Smoothly, without looking at him, Ricchio said: "There's an answer to that one, too . . . Ten grand today, Walden. The other ten the first of the week. Unless we have trouble. . . . If we do, we'll get paid for our trouble."

Walden made an aimless, defeated gesture with both hands outspread. "I guess I can arrange it," he said hurriedly.

"Swell. We'll be on our way then."

Ricchio nodded shortly and put his gun away. He took a brown kid glove out of his pocket, put it on his right hand, moved across then took Dalmas's Colt away from the sandy-haired man. He looked it over, slipped it into his side pocket and held it there with the gloved hand.

"Let's drift," he said with a jerk of his head. They went out. Derek Walden stared after them bleakly.

The elevator car was empty except for the operator. They got off

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at the mezzanine and went across a silent writing room past a stained-glass window with lights behind it to give the effect of sunshine. Ricchio walked half a step behind on Dalmas's left. The sandy-haired man was on his right, crowding him.

They went down carpeted steps to an arcade of luxury shops, along that, out of the hotel through the side entrance. A small brown sedan was parked across the street. The sandy-haired man slid behind the wheel, stuck his gun under his leg and stepped on the starter. Ricchio and Dalmas got in the back. Ricchio drawled: "East on the boulevard, Noddy. I've got to figure."

Noddy grunted. "That's a kick," he growled over his shoulder. "Ridin' a guy down Wilshire in daylight."

"Drive the heap, bozo."

The sandy-haired man grunted again and drove the small sedan away from the curb, slowed a moment later for the boulevard stop. An empty Yellow pulled away from the west curb, swung around in the middle of the block and fell in behind. Noddy made his stop, turned right, and went on. The taxi did the same. Ricchio glanced back at it without interest. There was a lot of traffic on Wilshire.

Dalmas leaned back against the upholstery and said thoughtfully: "Why wouldn't Walden use his telephone while we were coming down?"

Ricchio smiled at him. He took his hat off and dropped it in his lap, then took his right hand out of his pocket and held it under the hat with the gun in it.

"He wouldn't want us to get mad at him, dick."

"So he lets a couple of punks take me for the ride."

Ricchio said coldly: "It's not that kind of a ride. We need you in our business . . . And we ain't punks, see?"

Dalmas rubbed his jaw with a couple of fingers. He smiled quickly and snapped: "Straight ahead at Robertson?"

"Yeah. I'm still figuring," Ricchio said.

"What a brain!" the sandy-haired man sneered.

Ricchio grinned tightly and showed even white teeth. The light changed to red half a block ahead. Noddy slid the sedan forward and was first in the line at the intersection. The empty Yellow drifted up on his left. Not quite level. The driver of it had red hair. His cap was balanced on one side of his head and he whistled cheerfully past a toothpick.

Dalmas drew his feet back against the seat and put his weight on them. He pressed his back hard against the upholstery. The tall traffic light went green and the sedan started forward, then hung a moment for a car that crowded into a fast left turn. The Yellow slipped forward on the left and the red-haired driver leaned over his wheel, yanked it suddenly to the right. There was a grinding, tearing noise. The riveted fender of the taxi plowed over the low-swung fender of the brown sedan, locked over its left front wheel.

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The two cars jolted to a stop.

Horn blasts behind the two cars sounded angrily, impatiently.

Dalmas's right fist crashed against Ricchio's jaw. His left hand closed over the gun in Ricchio's lap. He jerked it loose as Ricchio sagged in the corner. Ricchio's head wobbled. His eyes opened and shut flickeringly. Dalmas slid away from him along the seat and slipped the Colt under his arm.

Noddy was sitting quite still in the front seat. His right hand moved slowly towards the gun under his thigh. Dalmas opened the door of the sedan and got out, shut the door, took two steps, and opened the door of the taxi. He stood beside the taxi and watched the sandy-haired man.

Horns of the stalled cars blared furiously. The driver of the Yellow was out in front tugging at the two cars with a great show of energy and with no result at all. His toothpick waggled up and down in his mouth. A motorcycle officer in amber glasses threaded the traffic, looked the situation over wearily, jerked his head at the driver.

"Get in and back up," he advised. "Argue it out somewhere else—we use this intersection."

The driver grinned and scuttled around the front end of his Yellow. He climbed into it, threw it in gear, and worried it backwards with a lot of tooting and arm-waving. It came clear. The sandy-haired man peered woodenly from the sedan. Dalmas got into the taxi and pulled the door shut.

The motorcycle officer drew a whistle out and blew two sharp blasts on it, spread his arms from east to west. The brown sedan went through the intersection like a cat chased by a police dog.

The Yellow went after it. Half a block on, Dalmas leaned forward and tapped on the glass. "Let 'em go, Joey. You can't catch them and I don't want them. . . . That was a swell routine back there."

The redhead leaned his chin towards the opening in the panel. "Cinch, Chief," he said, grinning. "Try me on on a hard one some time."

2.

The telephone rang at twenty minutes to five. Dalmas was lying on his back on the bed. He was in his room at the Merrivale. He reached for the phone without looking at it, said: "Hello."

The girl's voice was pleasant and a little strained. "This is Mianne Crayle. Remember?"

Dalmas took a cigarette from between his lips. "Yes, Miss Crayle."

"Listen. You must please go over and see Derek Walden. He's worried stiff about something and he's drinking himself blind. Something's got to be done."

Dalmas stared past the phone at the ceiling. The hand holding his cigarette beat a tattoo on the side of the bed. He said slowly: "He doesn't answer his phone, Miss Crayle. I've tried to call him a time or two."

There was a short silence at the other end of the line. Then the

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voice said: "I left my key under the door. You'd better just go on in."

Dalmas's eyes narrowed. The fingers of his right hand became still. He said slowly: "I'll get over there right away, Miss Crayle. Where can I reach you?"

"I'm not sure . . . At John Sutro's, perhaps. We were supposed to go there."

Dalmas said: "That's fine." He waited for the click, then hung up and put the phone away on the night table. He sat up on the side of the bed and stared at a patch of sunlight on the wall for a minute or two. Then he shrugged, stood up. He finished a drink that stood beside the telephone, put on his hat, went down in the elevator, and got into the second taxi in the line outside the hotel.

"Kilmarnock again, Joey. Step on it."

It took fifteen minutes to get to Kilmarnock.

The tea dance had let out and the streets around the big hotel were a mess of cars bucking their way out from the three entrances. Dalmas got out of the taxi half a block away and walked past groups of flushed debutantes and their escorts to the arcade entrance. He went in, walked up the stairs to the mezzanine, crossed the writing room, and got into an elevator full of people. They all got out before the penthouse floor.

Dalmas rang Walden's bell twice. Then he bent over and looked under the door. There was a fine thread of light broken by an obstruction. He looked back at the elevator indicators, then stooped and teased something out from under the door with the blade of a penknife. It was a flat key. He went in with it . . . stopped . . . stared . . .

There was death in the big room. Dalmas went towards it slowly, walking softly, listening. There was a hard light in his gray eyes and the bone of his jaw made a sharp line that was pale against the tan of his cheek.

Derek Walden was slumped almost casually in the brown and gold chair. His mouth was slightly open. There was a blackened hole in his right temple, and a lacy pattern of blood spread down the side of his face and across the hollow of his neck as far as the soft collar of his shirt. His right hand trailed in the thick nap of the rug. The fingers held a small, black automatic.

The daylight was beginning to fade in the room. Dalmas stood perfectly still and stared at Derek Walden for a long time. There was no sound anywhere. The breeze had gone down and the awnings outside the French windows were still.

Dalmas took a pair of thin suede gloves from his left hip pocket and drew them on. He kneeled on the rug beside Walden and gently eased the gun from the clasp of his stiffening fingers. It was a .32, with a walnut grip, a black finish. He turned it over and looked at the stock. His mouth tightened. The number had been filed off and the patch of file marks glistened faintly against the dull black of the finish. He put the gun down on the rug and stood up, walked

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slowly towards the telephone that was on the end of a library table, beside a flat bowl of cut flowers.

He put his hand towards the phone but didn't touch it. He let the hand fall to his side. He stood there a moment, then turned and went quickly back and picked up the gun again. He slipped the magazine out and ejected the shell that was in the breech, picked that up and pressed it into the magazine. He forked two fingers of his left hand over the barrel, held the cocking piece back, twisted the breech block, and broke the gun apart. He took the butt piece over to the window.

The number that was duplicated on the inside of the stock had not been filed off.

He reassembled the gun quickly, put the empty shell into the chamber, pushed the magazine home, cocked the gun, and fitted it back into Derek Walden's dead hand. He pulled the suede gloves off his hands and wrote the number down in a small notebook.

He left the apartment, went down in the elevator, left the hotel. It was half-past five and some of the cars on the boulevard had switched on their lights.

3.

The blond man who opened the door at Sutro's did it very thoroughly. The door crashed back against the wall and the blond man sat down on the floor—still holding on to the knob. He said indignantly: "Earthquake, by gad!"

Dalmas looked down at him without amusement.

"Is Miss Mianne Crayle here—or wouldn't you know?" he asked.

The blond man got off the floor and hurled the door away from him. It went shut with another crash. He said in a loud voice: "Everybody's here but the Pope's tomcat—and he's expected."

Dalmas nodded. "You ought to have a swell party."

He went past the blond man down the hall and turned under an arch into a big old-fashioned room with built-in china closets and a lot of shabby furniture. There were seven or eight people in the room and they were all flushed with liquor.

A girl in shorts and a green polo shirt was shooting craps on the floor with a man in dinner clothes. A fat man with nose-glasses was talking sternly into a toy telephone. He was saying: "Long Distance—Sioux City—and put some snap into it, sister!"

The radio blared "Sweet Madness."

Two couples were dancing around, carelessly bumping into each other and the furniture. A man who looked like Al Smith was dancing all alone, with a drink in his hand and an absent expression on his face. A tall, white-faced blonde weaved towards Dalmas, slopping liquor out of her glass. She shrieked: "Darling! Fancy meeting you here!"

Dalmas went around her, went towards a saffron-colored woman who had just come into the room with a bottle of gin in each hand.

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She put the bottles on the piano and leaned against it, looking bored. Dalmas went up to her and asked for Miss Crayle.

The saffron-colored woman reached a cigarette out of an open box on the piano. "Outside—in the yard," she said tonelessly.

Dalmas said: "Thank you, Mrs. Sutro."

She stared at him blankly. He went under another arch, into a darkened room with wicker furniture in it. A door led to a glassed-in porch and a door out of that led down steps to a path that wound off through dim trees. Dalmas followed the path to the edge of a bluff that looked out over the lighted part of Hollywood. There was a stone seat at the edge of the bluff. A girl sat on it with her back to the house. A cigarette tip glowed in the darkness. She turned her head slowly and stood up.

She was small and dark and delicately made. Her mouth showed dark with rouge, but there was not enough light to see her face clearly. Her eyes were shadowed.

Dalmas said: "I have a cab outside, Miss Crayle. Or did you bring a car?"

"No car. Let's go. It's rotten here, and I don't drink gin."

They went back along the path and passed around the side of the house. A trellis-topped gate let them out on the sidewalk, and they went along by the fence to where the taxi was waiting. The driver was leaning against it with one heel hooked on the edge of the running board. He opened the cab door. They got in.

Dalmas said: "Stop at a drugstore for some butts, Joey."

"Okay."

Joey slid behind his wheel and started up. The cab went down a steep, winding hill. There was a little moisture on the surface of the asphalt pavement and the storefronts echoed back the swishing sound of the tires.

After a while Dalmas said: "What time did you leave Walden?"

The girl spoke without turning her head towards him. "About three o'clock."

"Put it a little later, Miss Crayle. He was alive at three o'clock—and there was somebody else with him."

The girl made a small, miserable sound like a strangled sob. Then, she said very softly: "I know . . . he's dead." She lifted her gloved hands and pressed them against her temples.

Dalmas said: "Sure. Let's not get any more tricky than we have to . . . Maybe we'll have to—enough."

She said very slowly, in a low voice: "I was there after he was dead."

Dalmas nodded. He did not look at her. The cab went on and after a while it stopped in front of a corner drugstore. The driver turned in his seat and looked back. Dalmas stared at him, but spoke to the girl.

"You ought to have told me more over the phone. I might have got in a hell of a jam. I may be in a hell of a jam now."

The girl swayed forward and started to fall. Dalmas put his arm

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out quickly and caught her, pushed her back against the cushions. Her head wobbled on her shoulders and her mouth was a dark gash in her stone-white face. Dalmas held her shoulder and felt her pulse with his free hand. He said sharply, grimly: "Let's go on to Carli's, Joey. Never mind the butts . . . This party has to have a drink—in a hurry."

Joey slammed the cab in gear and stepped on the accelerator.

4.

Carli's was a small club at the end of a passage between a sporting-goods store and a circulating library. There was a grilled door and a man behind it who had given up trying to look as if it mattered who came in.

Dalmas and the girl sat in a small booth with hard seats and looped-back green curtains. There were high partitions between the booths. There was a long bar down the other side of the room and a big jukebox at the end of it. Now and then, when there wasn't enough noise, the bartender put a nickel in the jukebox.

The waiter put two small glasses of brandy on the table and Mianne Crayle downed hers at a gulp. A little light came into her shadowed eyes. She peeled a black-and-white gauntlet off her right hand and sat playing with the empty fingers of it, staring down at the table. After a little while the waiter came back with a couple of brandy highballs.

When he had gone away again Mianne Crayle began to speak in a low, clear voice, without raising her head: "I wasn't the first of his women by several dozen. I wouldn't have been the last—by that many more. But he had his decent side. And believe it or not, he didn't pay my room rent."

Dalmas nodded, didn't say anything. The girl went on without looking at him: "He was a heel in a lot of ways. When he was sober he had the dark blue sulks. When he was lit up he was vile. When he was nicely edged he was a pretty good sort of guy besides being the best smut director in Hollywood. He could get more smooth sexy tripe past the Hays office than any other three men."

Dalmas said without expression: "He was on his way out. Smut is on its way out, and that was all he knew."

The girl looked at him briefly, lowered her eyes again and drank a little of her highball. She took a tiny handkerchief out of the pocket of her sports jacket and patted her lips.

The people on the other side of the partition were making a great deal of noise.

Mianne Crayle said: "We had lunch on the balcony. Derek was drunk and on the way to get drunker. He had something on his mind. Something that worried him a lot."

Dalmas smiled faintly. "Maybe it was the twenty grand somebody was trying to pry loose from him—or didn't you know about that?"

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"It might have been that Derek was a bit tight about money."

"His liquor cost him a lot," Dalmas said dryly. "And that motor cruiser he liked to play about in—down below the border."

The girl lifted her head with a quick jerk. There were sharp lights of pain in her dark eyes. She said very slowly: "He bought all his liquor at Ensenada. Brought it in himself. He had to be careful—with the quantity he put away."

Dalmas nodded. A cold smile played about the corners of his mouth. He finished his drink and put a cigarette in his mouth, felt in his pocket for a match. The holder on the table was empty.

"Finish your story, Miss Crayle," he said.

"We went up to the apartment. He got two fresh bottles out and said he was going to get good and drunk . . . Then we quarreled . . . I couldn't stand any more of it. I went away. When I got home I began to worry about him. I called up but he wouldn't answer the phone. I went back finally . . . and let myself in with the key I had . . . and he was dead in the chair."

After a moment Dalmas said: "Why didn't you tell me some of that over the phone?"

She pressed the heels of her hands together, said very softly: "I was terribly afraid . . . And there was something . . . wrong."

Dalmas put his head back against the partition, stared at her with his eyes half closed.

"It's an old gag," she said. "I'm almost ashamed to spring it. But Derek Walden was left-handed . . . I'd know about that, wouldn't I?"

Dalmas said very softly: "A lot of people must have known that—but one of them might have got careless."

Dalmas stared at Mianne Crayle's empty glove. She was twisting it between her fingers.

"Walden was left-handed," he said slowly. "That means he didn't suicide. The gun was in his other hand. There was no sign of a struggle and the hole in his temple was powder-burned, looked as if the shot came from about the right angle. That means whoever shot him was someone who could get in there and get close to him. Or else he was paralyzed drunk, and in that case whoever did it had to have a key."

Mianne Crayle pushed the glove away from her. She clenched her hands. "Don't make it any plainer," she said sharply. "I know the police will think I did it. Well—I didn't. I loved the poor damn fool. What do you think of that?"

Dalmas said without emotion: "You *could* have done it, Miss Crayle. They'll think of that, won't they? And you might be smart enough to act the way you have afterwards. They'll think of that, too."

"That wouldn't be smart," she said bitterly. "Just smart-aleck."

"Smart-aleck kill!" Dalmas laughed grimly. "Not bad." He ran his fingers through his crisp hair. "No, I don't think we can pin it on you—and maybe the cops won't know he was left-handed . . . until

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somebody else gets a chance to find things out."

He leaned over the table a little, put his hands on the edge as if to get up. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully on her face.

"There's one man downtown that might give me a break. He's all cop, but he's an old guy and don't give a damn about his publicity. Maybe if you went down with me, let him size you up and hear the story, he'd stall the case a few hours and hold out on the papers."

He looked at her questioningly. She drew her glove on and said quietly: "Let's go."

5.

When the elevator doors at the Merrivale closed, the big man put his newspaper down from in front of his face and yawned. He got up slowly from the settee in the corner and loafed across the small but sedate lobby. He squeezed himself into a booth at the end of a row of house phones. He dropped a coin in the slot and dialed with a thick forefinger, forming the number with his lips.

After a pause he leaned close to the mouthpiece and said: "This is Denny. I'm at the Merrivale. Our man just came in. I lost him outside and came here to wait for him to get back."

He had a heavy voice with a burr in it. He listened to the voice at the other end, nodded, and hung up without saying anything more. He went out of the booth, crossed to the elevators. On the way he dropped a cigar butt into a glazed jar full of white sand.

In the elevator he said: "Ten," and took his hat off. He had straight black hair that was damp with perspiration, a wide, flat face, and small eyes. His clothes were unpressed, but not shabby. He was a studio dick and he worked for Eclipse Films.

He got out at the tenth floor and went along a dim corridor, turned a corner, and knocked at a door. There was a sound of steps inside. The door opened. Dalmas opened it.

The big man went in, dropped his hat casually on the bed, sat down in an easy chair by the window without being asked.

He said: "Hi, boy. I hear you need some help."

Dalmas looked at him for a moment without answering. Then he said slowly, frowningly: "Maybe—for a tail. I asked for Collins. I thought you'd be too easy to spot."

He turned away and went into the bathroom, came out with two glasses. He mixed the drinks on the bureau, handed one. The big man drank, smacked his lips, and put his glass down on the sill of the open window. He took a short, chubby cigar out of his vest pocket.

"Collins wasn't around," he said. "And I was just countin' my thumbs. So the big cheese give me the job. Is it footwork?"

"I don't know. Probably not," Dalmas said indifferently.

"If it's a tail in a car, I'm okay. I brought my little coupe."

Dalmas took his glass and sat down on the side of the bed. He stared at the big man with a faint smile. The big man bit the end

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off his cigar and spit it out.

Then he bent over and picked up the piece, looked at it, tossed it out of the window.

"It's a swell night. A bit warm for so late in the year," he said.

Dalmas said slowly: "How well do you know Derek Walden, Denny?"

Denny looked out of the window. There was a sort of haze in the sky and the reflection of a red neon sign behind a nearby building looked like a fire.

He said: "I don't what you call know him. I've seen him around. I know he's one of the big money guys on the lot."

"Then you won't fall over if I tell you he's dead," Dalmas said evenly.

Denny turned around slowly. The cigar, still unlighted, moved up and down in his wide mouth. He looked mildly interested.

Dalmas went on: "It's a funny one. A blackmail gang has been working on him, Denny. Looks like it got his goat. He's dead—with a hole in his head and a gun in his hand. It happened this afternoon."

Denny opened his small eyes a little wider. Dalmas sipped his drink and rested the glass on his thigh.

"His girlfriend found him. She had a key to the apartment in the Kilmarnock. The Jap boy was away and that's all the help he kept. The gal didn't tell anyone. She beat it and called me up. I went over . . . I didn't tell anybody either."

The big man said very slowly: "For Pete's sake! The cops'll stick it into you and break it off, brother. You can't get away with that stuff."

Dalmas stared at him, then turned his head away and stared at a picture on the wall. He said coldly: "I'm doing it—and you're helping me. We've got a job, and a damn powerful organization behind us. There's a lot of sugar at stake."

"How do you figure?" Denny asked grimly. He didn't look pleased.

"The girlfriend doesn't think Walden suicided, Denny. I don't either, and I've got a sort of lead. But it has to be worked fast, because it's as good a lead for the law as us. I didn't expect to be able to check it right away, but I got a break."

Denny said: "Uh-huh. Don't make it too clever. I'm a slow thinker."

He struck a match and lit his cigar. His hand shook just a little.

Dalmas said: "It's not clever. It's kind of dumb. The gun that killed Walden is a filed gun. But I broke it and the inside number wasn't filed. And Headquarters has the number, in the special permits."

"And you just went in and asked for it and they gave it to you," Denny said grimly. "And when they pick Walden up and trace the gun themselves, they'll just think it was swell of you to beat them to it." He made a harsh noise in his throat.

Dalmas said: "Take it easy, boy. The guy that did the checking rates. I don't have to worry about that."

"Like hell you don't! And what would a guy like Walden be doin'

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with a filed gun? That's a felony rap."

Dalmas finished his drink and carried his empty glass over to the bureau. He held the whiskey bottle out. Denny shook his head. He looked very disgusted.

"If he had the gun, he might not have known about that, Denny. And it could be that it wasn't his gun at all. If it was a killer's gun, then the killer was an amateur. A professional wouldn't have that kind of artillery."

The big man said slowly: "Okay, what you get on the rod?"

Dalmas sat down on the bed again. He dug a package of cigarettes out of his pocket, lit one, and leaned forward to toss the match through the open window. He said: "The permit was issued about a year ago to a newshawk on the *Press-Chronicle,* name of Dart Burwand. This Burwand was bumped off last April on the ramp of the Arcade Depot. He was all set to leave town, but he didn't make it. They never cracked the case, but the hunch is that this Burwand was tied to some racket—like the Lingle killing in Chi—and that he tried to shake one of the big boys. The big boy backfired on the idea. Exit Burwand."

The big man was breathing deeply. He had let his cigar go out. Dalmas watched him gravely while he talked.

"I got that from Westfalls, on the *Press-Chronicle,"* Dalmas said. "He's a friend of mine. There's more of it. This gun was given back to Burwand's wife—probably. She still lives here—out on North Kenmore. She might tell me what she did with the gun . . . and she might be tied to some racket herself, Denny. In that case she wouldn't tell me, but after I talk to her she might make some contacts we ought to know about. Get the idea?"

Denny struck another match and held it on the end of his cigar. His voice said thickly: "What do I do—tail the broad after you put the idea to her, about the gun?"

"Right."

The big man stood up, pretended to yawn. "Can do," he grunted. "But why all the hush-hush about Walden? Why not let the cops work it out? We're just going to get ourselves a lot of bad marks at Headquarters."

Dalmas said slowly: "It's got to be risked. We don't know what the blackmail crowd had on Walden, and the studio stands to lose too much money if it comes out in the investigation and gets a front-page spread all over the country."

Denny said: "You talk like Walden was spelled Valentino. Hell, the guy's only a director. All they got to do is take his name off a couple of unreleased pictures."

"They figure different," Dalmas said. "But maybe that's because they haven't talked to you."

Denny said roughly: "Okay. But me, I'd let the girlfriend take the damn rap! All the law ever wants is a fall guy." He went around the

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bed to get his hat, crammed it on his head. "Swell," he said sourly. "We gotta find out all about it before the cops even know Walden is dead." He gestured with one hand and laughed mirthlessly. "Like they do in the movies."

Dalmas put the whiskey bottle away in the bureau drawer and put his hat on. He opened the door and stood aside for Denny to go out. He switched off the lights. It was ten minutes to nine.

6.

The tall blonde looked at Dalmas out of greenish eyes with very small pupils. He went in past her quietly, without seeming to move quickly. He pushed the door shut with his elbow.

He said: "I'm a dick—private—Mrs. Burwand. Trying to dig up a little dope you might know about."

The blonde said: "The name is Dalton, Helen Dalton. Forget the Burwand stuff."

Dalmas smiled and said: "I'm sorry. I should have known."

The blonde shrugged her shoulders and drifted away from the door. She sat down on the edge of a chair that had a cigarette burn on the arm. The room was a furnished-apartment living room with a lot of department store bric-a-brac spread around. Two floor lamps burned. There were flounced pillows on the floor, a French doll sprawled against the base of one lamp, and a row of gaudy novels went across the mantel, above the gas fire.

Dalmas said politely, swinging his hat: "It's about a gun Dart Burwand used to own. It's showed up on a case I'm working. I'm trying to trace it—from the time you had it."

Helen Dalton scratched the upper part of her arm. She had half-inch-long fingernails. She said curtly: "I don't have an idea what you're talking about."

Dalmas stared at her and leaned against the wall. His voice got on edge.

"Maybe you remember that you used to be married to Dart Burwand and that he got bumped off last April . . . Or is that too far back?"

The blonde bit one of her knuckles and said: "Smart guy, huh?"

"Not unless I have to be. But don't fall asleep from that last shot in the arm."

Helen Dalton sat up very straight, suddenly. All the vagueness went out of her expression. She spoke between tight lips.

"What's the howl about the gun?"

"It killed a guy, that's all," Dalmas said carelessly.

She stared at him. After a moment she said: "I was broke. I hocked it. I never got it out. I had a husband that made sixty bucks a week but didn't spend any of it on me. I never had a dime."

Dalmas nodded. "Remember the pawnshop where you left it?" he asked. "Or maybe you still have the ticket."

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"No. It was on Main. The street's lined with them. And I don't have the ticket."

Dalmas said: "I was afraid of that."

He walked slowly across the room, looked at the titles of some of the books on the mantel. He went on and stood in front of a small folding desk. There was a photo in a silver frame on the desk. Dalmas stared at it for some time. He turned slowly.

"It's too bad about the gun, Helen. A pretty important name was rubbed out with it this afternoon. The number was filed off the outside. If you hocked it, I'd figure some hood bought it from the hockshop guy, except that a hood wouldn't file a gun that way. He'd know there was another number inside. So it wasn't a hood—and the man it was found with wouldn't be likely to get a gun in a hock shop."

The blonde stood up slowly. Red spots burned in her cheeks. Her arms were rigid at her sides and her breath whispered. She said slowly, strainedly: "You can't maul me around, dick. I don't want any part of any police business—and I've got some good friends to take care of me. Better scram."

Dalmas looked back towards the frame on the desk. "Johnny Sutro oughtn't to leave his mug around in a broad's apartment that way. Somebody might think he was cheating."

The blonde walked stiff-legged across the room and slammed the photo into the drawer of the desk. She slammed the drawer shut, and leaned her hips against the desk.

"You're all wet, shamus. That's not anybody called Sutro. Get on out, will you, for gawd's sake?"

Dalmas laughed unpleasantly. "I saw you at Sutro's house this afternoon. You were so drunk you don't remember."

The blonde made a movement as though she were going to jump at him. Then she stopped, rigid. A key turned in the room door. It opened and a man came in. He stood just inside the door and pushed it shut very slowly. His right hand was in the pocket of a light tweed overcoat. He was dark-skinned, high-shouldered, angular, with a sharp nose and chin.

Dalmas looked at him quietly and said: "Good evening, Councilman Sutro."

The man looked past Dalmas at the girl. He took no notice of Dalmas. The girl said shakily: "This guy says he's a dick. He's giving me a third about some gun he says I had. Throw him out, will you?"

Sutro said: "A dick, eh?"

He walked past Dalmas without looking at him. The blonde backed away from him and fell into a chair. Her face got a pasty look and her eyes were scared. Sutro looked down at her for a moment, then turned around and took a small automatic out of his pocket. He held it loosely, pointed down at the floor.

He said: "I haven't a lot of time."

Dalmas said: "I was just going." He moved near the door. Sutro

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said sharply: "Let's have the story first."

Dalmas said: "Sure."

He moved lithely, without haste, and threw the door wide open. The gun jerked up in Sutro's hand. Dalmas said: "Don't be a sap. You're not starting anything here and you know it."

The two men stared at each other. After a moment or two Sutro put the gun back into his pocket and licked his thin lips. Dalmas said: "Miss Dalton had a gun once that killed a man—recently. But she hasn't had it for a long time. That's all I wanted to know."

Sutro nodded slowly. There was a peculiar expression in his eyes.

"Miss Dalton is a friend of my wife's. I wouldn't want her to be bothered," he said coldly.

"That's right. You wouldn't," Dalmas said. "But a legitimate dick has a right to ask legitimate questions. I didn't break in here."

Sutro eyed him slowly. "Okay, but take it easy on my friends. I draw water in this town and I could hang a sign on you."

Dalmas nodded. He went quietly out of the door and shut it. He listened a moment. There was no sound inside that he could hear. He shrugged and went on down the hall, down three steps, and across a small lobby that had no switchboard. Outside the apartment house he looked along the street. It was an apartment-house district and there were cars parked up and down the street. He went towards the lights of the taxi that was waiting for him.

Joey, the red-haired driver, was standing on the edge of the curb in front of his hack. He was smoking a cigarette, staring across the stret, apparently at a big, dark coupe that was parked with its left side to the curb. As Dalmas came up to him he threw his cigarette away and came to meet him.

He spoke quickly: "Listen, boss. I got a look at the guy in that Cad—"

Pale flame broke in bitter streaks from above the door of the coupe. A gun racketed between the buildings that faced each other across the street. Joey fell against Dalmas. The coupe jerked into sudden motion. Dalmas went down sidewise, onto one knee, with the driver clinging to him. He tried to reach his gun, couldn't make it. The coupe went around the corner with a squeal of rubber, and Joey fell down Dalmas's side and rolled over on his back on the sidewalk. He beat his hands up and down on the cement and a hoarse, anguished sound came from deep inside him.

Tires screeched again and Dalmas flung up to his feet, swept his hand to his left armpit. He relaxed as a small car skidded to a stop and Denny fell out of it, charged across the intervening space towards him.

Dalmas bent over the driver. Light from the lanterns beside the entrance to the apartment house showed blood on the front of Joey's whipcord jacket, blood that was seeping out through the material. Joey's eyes opened and shut like the eyes of a dying bird.

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Denny said: "No use to follow that bus. Too fast."

"Get on a phone and call an ambulance," Dalmas said quickly. "The kid's got a bellyful . . . Then take a plant on the blonde."

The big man hurried back to his car, jumped into it, and tore off around the corner. A window went open somewhere and a man yelled down. Some cars stopped. Dalmas bend down over Joey and muttered: "Take it easy, oldtimer . . . Easy, boy . . . easy."

7.

The homicide lieutenant's name was Weinkassel. He had thin, blond hair, icy blue eyes, and a lot of pockmarks. He sat in a swivel chair with his feet on the edge of a pulled-out drawer and a telephone scooped close to his elbow. The room smelled of dust and cigar butts.

A man named Lonergan, a bulky dick with gray hair and a gray moustache, stood near an open window, looking out of it morosely.

Weinkassel chewed on a match, stared at Dalmas, who was across the desk from him. He said: "Better talk a bit. The hack driver can't. You've had luck in this town and you wouldn't want to run it into the ground."

Lonergan said: "He's hard. He won't talk." He didn't turn around when he said it.

"A little less of your crap would go farther, Lonnie," Weinkassel said in a dead voice.

Dalmas smiled faintly and rubbed the palm of his hand against the side of the desk. It made a squeaking sound.

"What would I talk about?" he asked. "It was dark and I didn't get a flash of the man behind the gun. The car was a Cadillac coupe, without lights. I've told you this already, Lieutenant."

"It don't listen," Weinkassel grumbled. "There's something screwy about it. You gotta have some kind of a hunch who it could be. It's a cinch the gun was for you."

Dalmas said: "Why? The hack driver was hit and I wasn't. Those lads get around a lot. One of them might be in wrong with some tough boys."

"Like you," Lonergan said. He went on staring out of the window.

Weinkassel frowned at Lonergan's back and said patiently: "The car was outside while you was still inside. The hack driver was outside. If the guy with the gun had wanted him, he didn't have to wait for you to come out."

Dalmas spread his hands and shrugged. "You boys think I know who it was?"

"Not exactly. We think you could give us some names to check on, though. Who'd you go to see in them apartments?"

Dalmas didn't say anything for a moment. Lonergan turned away from the window, sat on the end of the desk and swung his legs. There was a cynical grin on his flat face.

"Come through, baby," he said cheerfully.

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Dalmas tilted his chair back and put his hands into his pockets. He stared at Weinkassel speculatively, ignored the gray-haired dick as though he didn't exist.

He said slowly: "I was there on business for a client. You can't make me talk about that."

Weinkassel shrugged and stared at him coldly. Then he took the chewed match out of his mouth, looked at the flattened end of it, tossed it away. "I might have a hunch your business had something to do with the shootin'," he said grimly. "That way the hush-hush would be out. Wouldn't it?"

"Maybe," Dalmas said. "If that's the way it's going to work out. But I ought to have a chance to talk to my client."

Weinkassel said: "Okay. You can have till the morning. Then you put your papers on the desk, see."

Dalmas nodded and stood up. "Fair enough, Lieutenant."

"Hush-hush is all a shamus knows," Lonergan said roughly.

Dalmas nodded to Weinkassel and went out of the office. He walked down a bleak corridor and up steps to the lobby floor. Outside the City Hall he went down a long flight of concrete steps and across Spring Street to where a blue Packard roadster, not very new, was parked. He got into it and drove around the corner, then through the Second Street tunnel, dropped over a block, and drove out west. He watched in the mirror as he drove.

At Alvarado he went into a drugstore and called his hotel. The clerk gave him a number to call. He called it and heard Denny's heavy voice at the other end of the line. Denny said urgently: "Where you been? I've got that broad out here at my place. She's drunk. Come on out and we'll get her to tell us what you want to know."

Dalmas stared out through the glass of the phone booth without seeing anything. After a pause he said slowly: "The blonde? How come?"

"It's a story, boy. Come on out and I'll give it to you. Fifteen-fifty-four South Livesay. Know where that is?"

"I've got a map. I'll find it," Dalmas said in the same tone.

Denny told him just how to find it, at some length. At the end of the explanation he said: "Make it fast. She's asleep now, but she might wake up and start yellin' murder."

Dalmas said: "Where you live, it probably wouldn't matter much . . . I'll be right out, Denny."

He hung up and went out to his car. He got a pint bottle of bourbon out of the car pocket and took a long drink. Then he started up and drove towards Fox Hills. Twice on the way he stopped and sat still in the car, thinking. But each time he went on again.

8.

The road turned off Pico into a scattered subdivision that spread itself out over rolling hills between two golf courses. It followed the

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edge of one of the golf courses, separated from it by a high wire fence. There were bungalows here and there dotted about the slopes. After a while the road dipped into a hollow and there was a single bungalow in the hollow, right across the street from the golf course.

Dalmas drove past it and parked under a giant eucalyptus that etched deep shadow on the moonlit surface of the road. He got out and walked back, turned up a cement path to the bungalow. It was wide and low and had cottage windows across the front. Bushes grew halfway up the screens. There was faint light inside and the sound of a radio, turned low, came through the open windows.

A shadow moved across the screens and the front door came open. Dalmas went into a living room built across the front of the house. One small bulb burned in a lamp and the luminous dial of the radio glowed. A little moonlight came into the room.

Denny had his coat off and his sleeves rolled up on his big arms.

He said: "The broad's still asleep. I'll wake her up when I've told you how I got her here."

Dalmas said, "Sure you weren't tailed?"

"Not a chance." Denny spread a big hand.

Dalmas sat down in a wicker chair in the corner, between the radio and the end of the line of windows. He put his hat on the floor, pulled out the bottle of bourbon and regarded it with a dissatisfied air. "Buy us a real drink, Denny. I'm tired as hell. Didn't get any dinner."

Denny said: "I've got some Three-Star Martel. Be right up." He went out of the room and light went on in the back part of the house. Dalmas put the bottle on the floor beside his hat and rubbed two fingers across his forehead. His head ached. After a little while the light went out in the back and Denny came back with two tall glasses.

The brandy tasted clean and hard. Denny sat down in another wicker chair. He looked very big and dark in the half-lit room. He began to talk slowly, in his gruff voice.

"It sounds goofy, but it worked. After the cops stopped milling around I parked in the alley and went in the back way. I knew which apartment the broad had but I hadn't seen her. I thought I'd make some kind of a stall and see how she was makin' out. I knocked on her door, but she wouldn't answer. I could hear her movin' around inside, and in a minute I could hear a telephone bein' dialed. I went back along the hall and tried the service door. It opened and I went in. It fastened with one of them screw bolts that get out of line and don't fasten when you think they do."

Dalmas nodded, said: "I get the idea, Denny."

The big man drank out of his glass and rubbed the edge of it up and down on his lower lip. He went on.

"She was phoning a guy named Gayn Donner. Know him?"

"I've heard of him," Dalmas said. "So she has that kind of connections."

"She was callin' him by name and she sounded mad," Denny said.

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"That's how I knew. Donner has that place on Mariposa Canyon Drive—the Mariposa Club. You hear his band over the air—Hank Munn and his boys."

Dalmas said: "I've heard it, Denny."

"Okay. When she hung up I went in on her. She looked snowed, weaved around funny, didn't seem to know much what was going on. I looked around and there was a photo of John Sutro, the councilman, in a desk there. I used that for a stall. I said that Sutro wanted her to duck out for a while and that I was one of his boys and she was to come along. She fell for it. Screwy. She wanted some liquor. I said I had some in the car. She got her little hat and coat."

Dalmas said softly: "It was that easy, huh?"

"Yeah," Denny said. He finished his drink and put the glass somewhere. "I bottle-fed her in the car to keep her quiet and we came out here. She went to sleep and that's that. What do you figure? Tough downtown?"

"Tough enough," Dalmas said. "I didn't fool the boys much."

"Anything on the Walden kill?"

Dalmas shook his head slowly. "I guess the Jap didn't get home yet, Denny."

"Want to talk to the broad?"

The radio was playing a waltz. Dalmas listened to it for a moment before he answered. Then he said in a tired voice: "I guess that's what I came out here for."

Denny got up and went out of the room. There was the sound of a door opening and muffled voices.

Dalmas took his gun out from under his arm and put it down in the chair beside his leg.

The blonde staggered a little too much as she came in. She stared around, giggled, made vague motions with her long hands. She blinked at Dalmas, stood swaying a moment, then slid down into the chair Denny had been sitting in. The big man kept near her and leaned against a library table that stood by the inside wall. She said drunkenly: "My old pal the dick. Hey, hey, stranger! How about buyin' a lady a drink?"

Dalmas stared at her without expression. He said slowly: "Got any new ideas about that gun? You know, the one we were talking about when Johnny Sutro crashed in . . . the filed gun . . . the gun that killed Derek Walden."

Denny stiffened, then made a sudden motion towards his hip. Dalmas brought his Colt up and came to his feet with it. Denny looked at it and became still, relaxed. The girl had not moved at all, but the drunkenness dropped away from her like a dead leaf. Her face was suddenly tense and bitter.

Dalmas said evenly: "Keep the hands in sight, Denny, and everything'll be jake . . . Now suppose you two cheap crossers tell me what I'm here for."

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The big man said thickly: "For gawd's sake! What's eatin' you? You scared me when you said 'Walden' to the girl."

Dalmas grinned. "That's all right, Denny. Maybe she never heard of him. Let's get this ironed out in a hurry. I have an idea I'm here for trouble."

"You're crazy as hell!" the big man snarled.

Dalmas moved the gun slightly. He put his back against the end wall of the room, leaned over, and turned the radio off with his left hand. Then he spoke bitterly: "You sold out, Denny. That's easy. You're too big for a tail and I've spotted you following me around half a dozen times lately. When you horned in on the deal tonight I was pretty sure . . . And when you told me that funny story about how you got baby out here I was *damn* sure . . . Hell's sake, do you think a guy that's stayed alive as long as I have would believe that one? Come on, Denny, be a sport and tell me who you're working for . . . I might let you take a powder . . . Who you working for? Donner? Sutro? Or somebody I don't know? And why the plant out here in the woods?"

The girl shot to her feet suddenly and sprang at him. He threw her off with his free hand and she sprawled on the floor. She yelled: "Get him, you big punk? Get him!"

Denny didn't move. "Shut up, snow-bird!" Dalmas snapped. "Nobody's getting anybody. This is just a talk between friends. Get up on your feet and stop throwing curves!"

The blonde stood up slowly.

Denny's face had a stony, immovable look in the dimness. His voice came with a dull rasp. He said: "I sold out. It was lousy. Okay, that's that. I got fed up with watchin' a bunch of extra girls trying to pinch each other's lipstick . . . You can take a plug at me, if you feel like it."

He still didn't move. Dalmas nodded slowly and said again: "Who is it, Denny? Who you working for?" Denny said: "I don't know. I call a number, get orders, and report that way. I get dough in the mail. I tried to break the twist here, but no luck . . . I don't think you're on the spot and I don't know a damn thing about that shootin' in the street."

Dalmas stared at him. He said slowly: "You wouldn't be stalling—to keep me here—would you, Denny?"

The big man raised his head slowly. The room suddenly seemed to get very still. A car had stopped outside. The faint throbbing of its motor died.

A red spotlight hit the top of the screens.

It was blinding. Dalmas slid down on one knee, shifted his position sidewise very quickly, silently. Denny's harsh voice in the silence said: "Cops, for gawd's sake!"

The red light dissolved the wire mesh of the screens into a rosy glow, threw a great splash of vivid color on the oiled finish of the inside wall. The girl made a choked sound and her face was a red mask for an instant before she sank down out of the fan of light.

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Dalmas looked into the light, his head low behind the sill of the end window. The leaves of the bushes were black spearpoints in the red glare.

Steps sounded on the walk. A harsh voice rasped: "Everybody out! Mitts in the air!"

There was a sound of movement inside the house. Dalmas swung his gun—uselessly. A switch clicked and a porch light went on. For a moment, before they dodged back, two men in blue police uniforms showed up in the cone of the porch light. One of them held a sub-machine gun and the other had a long Luger with a special magazine fitted to it.

There was a grating sound. Denny was at the door, opening the peep panel. A gun came up in his hand and crashed.

Something heavy clattered on the cement and a man swayed forward into the light, swayed back again. His hands were against his middle. A stiff-visored cap fell down and rolled on the walk.

Dalmas hit the floor low down against the baseboard as the machine gun cut loose. He ground his face into the wood of the floor. The girl screamed behind him.

The chopper raked the room swiftly from end to end and the air filled with plaster and splinters. A wall mirror crashed down. A sharp stench of powder fought with the sour smell of the plaster dust. This seemed to go on for a very long time. Something fell across Dalmas's legs. He kept his eyes shut and face pressed against the floor.

The stuttering and crashing stopped. The rain of plaster inside the walls kept on. A voice yelled: "How d'you like it, pals?"

Another voice far back snapped angrily: "Come on—let's go!"

Steps sounded again, and a dragging sound. More steps. The motor of the car roared into life. A door slammed heavily. Tires screeched on the gravel of the road and the song of the motor swelled and died swiftly.

Dalmas got up on his feet. His ears boomed and his nostrils were dry. He got his gun off the floor, unclipped a thin flash from an inside pocket, snapped it on. It probed weakly through the dusty air. The blonde lay on her back with her eyes wide open and her mouth twisted into a sort of grin. She was sobbing. Dalmas bent over her. There didn't seem to be a mark on her.

He went on down the room. He found his hat untouched beside the chair that had half the top shot off. The bottle of bourbon lay beside the hat. He picked them both up. The man with the chopper had raked the room waist-high, back and forth, without lowering it far enough. Dalmas went on farther, came to the door.

Denny was on his knees in front of the door. He was swaying backwards and forwards and holding one of his hands in the other. Blood dribbled between his thick fingers.

Dalmas got the door open and went out. There was a smear of blood and a litter of shells on the walk. There was nobody in sight.

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He stood there with the blood beating in his face like little hammers. The skin around his nose prickled. He drank some whiskey out of the bottle and turned and went back into the house. Denny was up on his feet now. He had a handkerchief out and was tying it around his bloody hand. He looked dazed, drunk. He swayed on his feet. Dalmas put the beam of the flash on his face.

He said: "Hurt much?"

"No. Clipped on the hand," the big man said thickly. His fingers were clumsy on the handkerchief.

"The blonde's scared blind," Dalmas said. "It's your party, boy. Nice pals you have. They meant to get all three of us. You rattled them when you took a pot out of the peephole. I guess I owe you something for that, Denny . . . The gunner wasn't so good."

Denny said: "Where you goin'?"

"Where d'you think?" Denny looked at him.

"Sutro's your man," he said slowly. "I'm through—washed up. They can all go to hell."

Dalmas went through the door again, down the path to the street. He got into his car and drove away without lights. When he had turned corners and gone some distance he switched the lights on and got out and dusted himself off.

9.

Black-and-silver curtains opened in an inverted V against a haze of cigarette and cigar smoke. The brasses of the dance band shot brief flashes of color through the haze. There was a smell of food and liquor and perfume and face powder. The dance floor was an empty splash of amber light and looked slightly larger than a screen star's bath mat.

Then the band started up and the lights went down, and a headwaiter came up the carpeted steps tapping a gold pencil against the satin stripe of his trousers. He had narrow, lifeless eyes and blond-white hair sleeked back off a bony forehead.

Dalmas said: "I'd like to see Mister Donner."

The headwaiter tapped his teeth with his gold pencil. "I'm afraid he's busy. What name?"

"Dalmas. Tell him I'm a special friend of Johnny Sutro's."

The headwaiter said: "I'll try."

He went across to a panel that had a row of buttons on it and a small one-piece phone. He took it off the hook and put it to his ear, staring at Dalmas across the cup with the impersonal stare of a stuffed animal.

Dalmas said: "I'll be in the lobby."

He went back through the curtains and prowled over to the men's room. Inside he got out the bottle of bourbon and drank what was left of it, tilting his head back and standing splay-legged in the middle of the tiled floor. A wizened Negro in a white jacket flut-

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tered at him, said anxiously: "No drinkin' in here, boss."

Dalmas threw the empty bottle into a receptacle for towels. He took a clean towel off the glass shelf, wiped his lips with it, put a dime down on the edge of the basin, and went out.

There was a space between an inner and outer door. He leaned against the outer door and took a small automatic about four inches long out of his vest pocket. He held it with three fingers against the inside of his hat and went on out, swinging the hat gently beside his body.

After a while a tall Filipino with silky black hair came into the lobby and looked around. Dalmas went towards him. The head-waiter looked out through the curtains and nodded at the Filipino. The Filipino spoke to Dalmas: "This way, boss."

They went down a long, quiet corridor. The sound of the dance band died away behind them. Some deserted green-topped tables showed through an open door. The corridor turned into another that was at right angles, and at the end of this one some light came out through a doorway.

The Filipino paused in midstride and made a graceful, complicated movement, at the end of which he had a big, black automatic in his hand. He prodded it politely into Dalmas's ribs.

"Got to frisk you, boss. House rules."

Dalmas stood still and held his arms out from his sides. The Filipino took Dalmas's Colt away from him and dropped it into his pocket. He patted the rest of Dalmas's pockets, stepped back and holstered his own cannon.

Dalmas lowered his arms and let his hat fall on the floor and the little automatic that had been inside the hat peered neatly at the Filipino's belly. The Filipino looked down at it with a shocked grin.

Dalmas said: "That was fun, spig. Let me do it."

He put his Colt back where it belonged, took the big automatic from under the Filipino's arm, slipped the magazine out of it, and ejected the shell that was in the chamber. He gave the empty gun back to the Filipino.

"You can still use it for a sap. If you stay in front of me, your boss don't have to know that's all it's good for."

The Filipino licked his lips. Dalmas felt him for another gun, and they went on along the corridor, went in at the door that was partly open. The Filipino went first.

It was a big room with walls paneled in diagonal strips of wood. A yellow Chinese rug on the floor, plenty of good furniture, counter-sunk doors that told of soundproofing, and no windows. There were several gilt gratings high up and a built-in ventilator fan made a faint, soothing murmur. Four men were in the room. Nobody said anything.

Dalmas sat down on a leather divan and stared at Ricchio, the smooth boy who had walked him out of Walden's apartment. Ricchio was tied to a high-backed chair. His arms were pulled

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around behind it and fastened together at the wrists. His eyes were mad and his face was a welter of blood and bruises. He had been pistol-whipped. The sandy-haired man, Noddy, who had been with him at the Kilmarnock, sat on a sort of stool in the corner, smoking.

John Sutro was rocking slowly in a red leather rocker, staring down at the floor. He did not look up when Dalmas came into the room. The fourth man sat behind a desk that looked as if it had cost a lot of money. He had soft brown hair parted in the middle and brushed back and down; thin lips and reddish-brown eyes that had hot lights in them. He watched Mallory while he sat down and looked around. Then he spoke, glancing at Ricchio.

"The punk got a little out of hand. We've been telling him about it. I guess you're not sorry."

Dalmas laughed shortly, without mirth. "All right as far as it goes, Donner. How about the other one? I don't see any marks on him."

"Noddy's all right, He worked under orders," Donner said evenly. He picked up a long-handled file and began to file one of his nails, "You and I have things to talk about. That's why you got in here. You look all right to me—if you don't try to cover too much ground with your private-dick racket."

Dalmas's eyes widened a little. He said: "I'm listening, Donner."

Sutro lifted his eyes and stared at the back of Donner's head. Donner went on talking in a smooth indifferent voice.

"I know all about the play at Derek Walden's place and I know about the shooting on Kenmore. If I'd thought Ricchio would go that crazy, I'd have stopped him before. As it is, I figure it's up to me to straighten things out . . . And when we get through here Mister Ricchio will go downtown and speak his piece.

"Here's how it happened. Ricchio used to work for Walden when the Hollywood crowd went in for bodyguards. Walden bought his liquor in Ensenada—still does, for all I know—and brought it in himself. Nobody bothered him. Ricchio saw a chance to bring in some white goods under good cover. Walden caught him at it. He didn't want a scandal, so he just showed Ricchio the gate. Ricchio took advantage of that by trying to shake Walden down, on the theory that he wasn't clean enough to stand the working-over the Feds would give him. Walden didn't shake fast enough to suit Ricchio, so he went hog-wild and decided on a strong-arm play. You and your driver messed it up and Ricchio went gunning for you."

Donner put down his file and smiled. Dalmas shrugged and glanced at the Filipino, who was standing by the wall, at the end of the divan.

Dalmas said: "I don't have your organization, Donner, but I get around, I think that's a smooth story and it would have got by—with a little cooperation downtown. But it won't fit the facts as they are now."

Donner raised his eyebrows. Sutro began to swing the tip of his polished shoe up and down in front of his knee.

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Dalmas said: "How does Mister Sutro fit into all this?"

Sutro stared, at him and stopped rocking. He made a swift, impatient movement. Donner smiled. "He's a friend of Walden's. Walden talked to him a little and Sutro knows Ricchio worked for me. But being a councilman, he didn't want to tell Walden everything he knew."

Dalmas said grimly: "I'll tell you what's wrong with your story, Donner. There's not enough fear in it. Walden was scared to help me even when I was working for him . . . And this afternoon somebody was so scared of him that he got shot."

Donner leaned forward and his eyes got small and tight. His hands balled into fists on the desk before him.

"Walden is—dead?" he almost whispered.

Dalmas nodded. "Shot in the right temple . . . with a thirty-two. It looks like suicide. It isn't."

Sutro put his hand up quickly and covered his face. The sandy-haired man got rigid on his stool in the corner.

Dalmas said: "Want to hear a good honest guess, Donner? . . . We'll call it a guess . . . Walden was in the dope-smuggling racket himself—and not all by his lonesome. But after Repeal he wanted to quit. The coast guards wouldn't have to spend so much time watching liquor ships, and dope-smuggling up the coast wasn't going to be gravy anymore. And Walden got sweet on a gal that had good eyes and could add up to ten. So he wanted to walk out on the dope racket."

Donner moistened his lips and said: "What dope racket?"

Dalmas eyed him, "You wouldn't know about anything like that, would you, Donner? Hell, no, that's something for the bad boys to play with. And the bad boys didn't like the idea of Walden quitting that way. He was drinking too much—and he might start to broadcast to his girlfriend. They wanted him to quit the way he did—on the receiving end of a gun."

Donner turned his head slowly and stared at the bound man on the high-backed chair. He said very softly: "Ricchio."

Then he got up and walked around his desk. Sutro took his hand down from his face and watched with his lips shaking.

Donner stood in front of Ricchio. He put his hand out against Ricchio's head and jarred it back against the chair. Ricchio moaned. Donner smiled down at him.

"I must be slowing up. *You* killed Walden, you bastard! You went back and croaked him. You forgot to tell us about that part, baby."

Ricchio opened his mouth and spit a stream of blood against Donner's hand and wrist. Donner's face twitched and he stepped back and away, holding the hand straight out in front of him. He took out a handkerchief and wiped it off carefully, dropped the handkerchief on the floor.

"Lend me your gun, Noddy," he said quietly, going towards the

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sandy-haired man.

Sutro jerked and his mouth fell open. His eyes looked sick. The tall Filipino flicked his empty automatic into his hand as if he had forgotten it was empty. Noddy took a blunt revolver from under his right arm, held it out to Donner.

Donner took it from him and went back to Ricchio. He raised the gun.

Dalmas said: "Ricchio didn't kill Walden."

The Filipino took a quick step forward and slashed at him with his big automatic. The gun hit Dalmas on the point of the shoulder, and a wave of pain billowed down his arm. He rolled away and snapped his Colt into his hand. The Filipino swung at him again, missed.

Dalmas slid to his feet, side-stepped, and laid the barrel of the Colt along the side of the Filipino's head, with all his strength. The Filipino grunted, sat down on the floor, and the whites showed all around his eyes. He fell over slowly, clawing at the divan.

There was no expression on Donner's face and he held his blunt revolver perfectly still. His long upper lip was beaded with sweat.

Dalmas said: "Ricchio didn't kill Walden. Walden was killed with a filed gun and the gun was planted in his hand. Ricchio wouldn't go within a block of a filed gun."

Sutro's face was ghastly. The sandy-haired man had got down off his stool and stood with his right hand swinging at his side.

"Tell me more," Donner said evenly.

"The filed gun traces to a broad named Helen Dalton or Burwand," Dalmas said. "It was her gun. She told me that she hocked it long ago. I didn't believe her. She's a good friend of Sutro's and Sutro was so bothered by my going to see her that he pulled a gat on me himself. Why do you suppose Sutro was bothered, Donner, and how do you suppose he knew I was likely to go see the broad?"

Donner said: "Go ahead and tell me." He looked at Sutro very quietly.

Dalmas took a step closer to Donner and held his Colt down at his side, not threateningly.

"I'll tell you how and why. I've been tailed ever since I started to work for Walden—tailed by a clumsy ox of a studio dick I could spot a mile off. He was bought, Donner. The guy that killed Walden bought him. He figured the studio dick had a chance to get next to me, and I let him do just that—to give him rope and spot his game. His boss was Sutro. Sutro killed Walden—with his own hand. It was that kind of a job. An amateur job—a smart-aleck kill. The thing that made it smart was the thing that gave it away—the suicide plant, with a filed gun that the killer thought couldn't be traced because he didn't know most guns have numbers inside."

Donner swung the blunt revolver until it pointed midway between the sandy-haired man and Sutro. He didn't say anything. His eyes were thoughtful and interested.

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Dalmas shifted his weight a little, onto the balls of his feet. The Filipino on the floor put a hand along the divan and his nails scratched on the leather.

"There's more of it, Donner, but what the hell! Sutro was Walden's pal and he could get close to him, close enough to stick a gun to his head and let go. A shot wouldn't be heard on the penthouse floor of the Kilmarnock, one little shot from a thirty-two. So Sutro put the gun in Walden's hand and went on his way. But he forgot that Walden was left-handed and he didn't know the gun could be traced. When it was—and his bought man wised him up—and I tapped the girl—he hired himself a chopper squad and angled all three of us out to a house in Palms to button our mouths for good . . . Only the chopper squad, like everything else in this play, didn't do its stuff so good."

Donner nodded slowly. He looked at a spot in the middle of Sutro's stomach and lined his gun on it.

"Tell us about it, Johnny," he said softly. "Tell us how you got clever in your old age—"

The sandy-haired man moved suddenly. He dodged down behind the desk and as he went down his right hand swept for his other gun. It roared from behind the desk. The bullet came through the kneehole and pinged into the wall with a sound of striking metal behind the paneling.

Dalmas jerked his Colt and fired twice into the desk. A few splinters flew. The sandy-haired man yelled behind the desk and came up fast with his gun flaming in his hand. Donner staggered. His gun spoke twice, very quickly. The sandy-haired man yelled again, and blood jumped straight out from one of his cheeks. He went down behind the desk and stayed quiet.

Donner backed until he touched the wall. Sutro stood up and put his hands in front of his stomach and tried to scream.

Donner said: "Okay, Johnny. Your turn."

Then Donner coughed suddenly and slid down the wall with a dry rustle of cloth. He bent forward and dropped his gun and put his hands on the floor and went on coughing. His face got gray.

Sutro stood rigid, his hands in front of his stomach and bent back at the wrists, the fingers curved clawlike. There was no light behind his eyes. They were dead eyes. After a moment his knees buckled and he fell down on the floor on his back.

Donner went on coughing quietly. Dalmas crossed swiftly to the door of the room, listened at it, opened it, and looked out. He shut it again quickly.

"Soundproof—and how!" he muttered. He went back to the desk and lifted the telephone off its prongs. He put his Colt down and dialed, waited, said into the phone: "Captain Cathcart . . . Got to talk to him . . . Sure, it's important . . . very important."

He waited, drumming on the desk, staring hard-eyed around the

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room. He jerked a little as a sleepy voice came over the wire.

"Dalmas, Chief. I'm at the Casa Mariposa, in Gayn Donner's private office. There's been a little trouble, but nobody hurt bad . . . I've got Derek Walden's killer for you. . . . Johnny Sutro did it. . . . Yeah, the councilman. . . . Make it fast, Chief . . . I wouldn't want to get in a fight with the help, you know. . . ."

He hung up and picked his Colt off the top of the desk, held it on the flat of his hand and stared across at Sutro.

"Get off the floor, Johnny," he said wearily. "Get up and tell a poor, dumb dick how to cover this one up—smart guy!"

10.

The light above the big oak table at Headquarters was too bright. Dalmas ran a finger along the wood, looked at it, wiped it off on his sleeve. He cupped his chin in his lean hands and stared at the wall above the roll-top desk that was beyond the table. He was alone in the room.

The loudspeaker on the wall droned: "Calling Car 71W in 72's district . . . at Third and Berendo . . . at the drugstore . . . meet a man . . ."

The door opened and Captain Cathcart came in, shut the door carefully behind him. He was a big, battered man with a wide, moist face, a strained moustache, gnarled hands.

He sat down between the oak table and the roll-top desk and fingered a cold pipe that lay in the ashtray.

Dalmas raised his head from between his hands. Cathcart said: "Sutro's dead."

Dalmas stared, said nothing.

"His wife did it. He wanted to stop by his house a minute. The boys watched him good but they didn't watch her. She slipped him the dose before they could move."

Cathcart opened and shut his mouth twice. He had strong, dirty teeth.

"She never said a damn word. Brought a little gun around from behind her and fed him three slugs. One, two, three. Win, place, show. Just like that. Then she turned the gun around in her hand as nice as you could think of and handed it to the boys . . . What in hell she do that for?"

Dalmas said: "Get a confession?"

Cathcart stared at him and put the cold pipe in his mouth. He sucked on it noisily. "From him? Yeah—not on paper, though . . . What you suppose she done that for?"

"She knew about the blonde," Dalmas said. "She thought it was her last chance. Maybe she knew about his rackets."

The captain nodded slowly. "Sure," he said. "That's it. She figured it was her last chance. And why shouldn't she bop the bastard? If the D.A.'s smart, he'll let her take a manslaughter plea. That'd be

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about fifteen months at Tehachapi. A rest cure."

Dalmas moved in his chair. He frowned.

Cathcart went on: "It's a break for all of us. No dirt your way, no dirt on the administration. If she hadn't done it, it would have been a kick in the pants all around. She ought to get a pension."

"She ought to get a contract from Eclipse Films," Dalmas said. "When I got to Sutro I figured I was licked on the publicity angle. I might have gunned Sutro myself—if he hadn't been so yellow—and if he hadn't been a councilman."

"Nix on that, baby. Leave that stuff to the law," Cathcart growled. "Here's how it looks. I don't figure we can get Walden on the book as a suicide. The filed gun is against it and we got to wait for the autopsy and the gun-shark's report. And a paraffin test of the hand ought to show he didn't fire the gun at all. On the other hand, the case is closed on Sutro and what has to come out ought not to hurt too bad. Am I right?"

Dalmas took out a cigarette and rolled it between his fingers. He lit it slowly and waved the match until it went out.

"Walden was no lily," he said. "It's the dope angle that would raise hell—but that's cold. I guess we're jake, except for a few loose ends."

"Hell with the loose ends," Cathcart grinned. "Nobody's getting away with any fix that I can see. That sidekick of yours, Denny, will fade in a hurry and if I ever get my paws on the Dalton frail, I'll send her to Mendocino for the cure. We might get something on Donner—after the hospital gets through with him. We've got to put the rap on those hoods, for the stick-up and the taxi driver, whichever of 'em did that, but they won't talk. They still got a future to think about, and the taxi driver ain't so bad hurt. That leaves the chopper squad." Cathcart yawned. "Those boys must be from Frisco. We don't run to choppers around here much."

Dalmas sagged in his chair. "You wouldn't have a drink, would you, Chief?" he said dully.

Cathcart stared at him. "There's just one thing," he said grimly. "I want you to stay told about that. It was okay for you to break that gun—if you didn't spoil the prints. And I guess it was okay for you not to tell me, seein' the jam you were in. But I'll be damned if it's okay for you to beat our time by chiselin' on our own records."

Dalmas smiled thoughtfully at him. "You're right all the way, Chief," he said humbly. "It was the job—and that's all a guy can say."

Cathcart rubbed his cheeks vigorously. His frown went away and he grinned. Then he bent over and pulled out a drawer and brought up a quart bottle of rye. He put it on the desk and pressed a buzzer. A very large uniformed torso came part way into the room.

"Hey, Tiny!" Cathcart boomed. "Loan me that corkscrew you swiped out of my desk." The torso disappeared and came back.

"What'll we drink to?" the captain asked a couple of minutes later.

Dalmas said: "Let's just drink." ●

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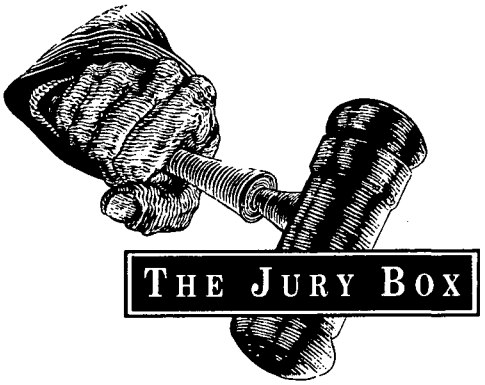

by Jon L. Breen

In his great 1970 debut, *A Clubbable Woman,* recently reprinted with a new introduction (Felony & Mayhem, $14.95), Reginald Hill introduced the Mid-Yorkshire police team of Andy Dalziel (crude old-school boss) and Peter Pascoe (posh university-educated newcomer). Over the decades since, the series has proved one of the most durable, varied, and consistently outstanding in the procedural genre. The British title of the latest volume, *The Death of Dalziel,* was subtly changed for its American edition. Only reading the book will tell you which title is more appropriate.

**** Reginald Hill: *Death Comes for the Fat Man,* HarperCollins, $24.95. Dalziel is gravely injured in an explosion engineered by an antiterrorist vigilante group which may have a mole in the Central Antiterrorism Unit. Pascoe, investigating on his own, to the dismay of the spooks, finds himself taking on the abrasive personality traits of his stricken mentor. The literate prose (keep a dictionary handy), keen character insights, and devious plotting, plus the suspense over the fate of Fat Andy, mark this an excellent addition to the saga.

*** Michael Connelly: *The Overlook,* Little, Brown, $21.99. The reductive turf wars between local police and national antiterrorism units get an American treatment in Los Angeles cop Harry Bosch's latest case, an expanded version of a *New York Times Magazine* serial with an admirably clued puzzle plot.

*** Jennifer Lee Carrell: *Interred With Their Bones,* Dutton, $25.95. Kate Stanley is directing a production of *Hamlet* at London's new Old Globe when a theatre fire and the death of her academic mentor send her on a perilous scholarly treasure hunt with multiple stops in the U.S.A., Britain, and Spain. Elements include a lost Shakespeare play, murders inspired by events in the Bard's works, and much pondering of who really wrote those plays. This Edgar-worthy first novel

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follows the formula of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code,* but is infinitely better written. A thorough and quite necessary concluding author's note separates fact from the fiction.

*** Richard Bachman: *Blaze,* foreword by Stephen King, Scribner, $25. King revives his Bachman pseudonym for one (last?) encore in a tragicomic crook story, written in the 1970s in acknowledged homage to Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and published only now in revised form. Mentally impaired giant Blaze attempts to carry out the kidnapping for ransom of a baby, helped by the ghost (or the memory) of his deceased mentor and protector George. Another proof of King's incomparable storytelling gift, the novel is accompanied by an equally powerful short story, "Memory."

*** W. R. Burnett: *Dr. Socrates,* O'Bryan House, $14.95. In a small Midwestern town, a troubled young doctor reluctantly becomes physician of choice for a gang of robbers headed by Red Bastian, a character inspired by John Dillinger. This expertly written and suspenseful Depression-era short novel by the author of *Little Caesar* appeared as a *Collier's* magazine serial in 1935 and was filmed the same year, but has never before been published in book form.

*** Jeffrey Miller: *Murder on the Rebound,* ECW, $19.95 Canada, $16.95 U.S. When a controversial law professor is accused of the poisoning murder of his research assistant, Ontario Court of Appeal Justice Ted Mariner defends, first in an unlikely but highly entertaining preliminary hearing in the Toronto law school's moot court room, then in a full-scale trial on revised charges. Neither the rather goofy plot nor the cat narrator, known as Amicus Curiae, whose graceful comic style owes an acknowledged debt to Rumpole of the Bailey, should discourage courtroom buffs from this third in a law-steeped series.

** John Mortimer: *Rumpole Misbehaves,* Viking, $23.95. The Old Bailey's immortal junior barrister defends a Timson youth charged with violating an Anti-Social Behavior Order, his crime chasing his football into the wrong street, and a client accused of murder who is very anxious to be defended by a QC (in polite language, Queen's Counsel; in Rumpole-speak, Queer Customer). Like other recent short novels in this series, mild fun for regular readers, but newcomers should seek out the early story collections (or TV shows) first.

** Dave Zeltserman: *Bad Thoughts,* Five Star, $25.95. Once a year, on the anniversary of his mother's brutal murder, Cambridge, Massachusetts cop Bill Shannon suffers nightmares and mysterious week-long blackouts. The reader is gripped immediately and held to the end, though the main surprise, revealed a little past the halfway point, both slows the impetus and challenges credibility. Violence and torture are over the top for some tastes, and the central premise may be

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too much to swallow, but solid prose, dialogue, and construction mark a writer worth watching.

** Ruth E. Weissberger, M.D.: *The Cure for Remembering,* Melville House, $22.95. In a short first novel set in 1991 New York, internist Dr. Nora Sternberg discovers that her elderly aunt, a former nurse who died suddenly after apparently successful surgery, was only one of several retired medical personnel to suffer the same fate. The plot, resolved by an institutionalized-relative-ex-machina, is thin, but the easy, humorous style and warts-and-all insider's view of the medical business give hope for future cases.

** Claudia Bishop: *The Case of the Tough-Talking Turkey,* Berkley, $6.99. Upstate New York veterinarian and retired academic Austin McKenzie investigates the murder of a much-hated local turkey farmer. If not quite up to the standard of his first case, the droll first-person narration and outsized characters continue to please.

No longtime reader of this magazine will seriously dispute that Michael Gilbert was arguably "one of the greatest crime fiction writers of the twentieth century," as averred by Tom and Enid Schantz in introducing his 1947 first novel *Close Quarters* (Rue Morgue, $14.95). Introducing his 1952 whodunit set in a World War II prisoner of war camp, *The Danger Within* (British title *Death in Captivity;* $14.95); the Schantzes recount Gilbert's experiences as a POW in Italy. A lighter Rue Morgue offering is the 1942 satire *The Widening Stain* ($14.95), a limerick-strewn academic mystery by Cornell University literature scholar Morris Bishop, writing as W. Bolingbroke Johnson. Rob Pudim's Thurber-inspired cover is an added inducement.

Other reprints include a pairing of two excellent pure suspense novels by Bill Pronzini, *Snowbound [and] Games* (Stark House, $14.95), first published in 1974 and 1976 respectively, with appropriately appreciative introductory remarks by Marcia Muller and Bob Randisi; and Lawrence Block's last Evan Tanner novel, the sleepless agent's 1998 comeback *Tanner on Ice* (Harper, $7.99), joining the earlier novels with an entertaining afterword on the history of the series. ●

Classic Cover

As a tie-in to our Black Mask series, *EQMM* will be reprinting some of the original *Black Mask* covers, including the one we've used this month by famed pulp artist Norman Saunders. Known for the speed at which he could produce his cover paintings (often two a week!) and his skill with action scenes, Norman Saunders illustrated for all genres—science fiction, adventure, and fantasy, as well as crime and detective fiction. He even worked on comic books, baseball cards, and "wacky packs"! According to his son, David Saunders, "he branded [his work] with his own dynamic design . . . and a solemn belief that life is tough." He was an artist, in other words, whose take on life coincided with that of the creators of the new hardboiled detectives that first saw life in *Black Mask,* and Saunders did many covers for *Black Mask* over the pulp's lifetime.

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BLACK MASK

THE SLEEPLESS SOUL

by C. J. Harper

I stood in the back room of the Sourdough Bar staring at the Lost Wall. Hollow faces stared back at me, their eyes a leaden gray. Two hundred. Maybe three. Each one different. Each one the same. All of them trapped in a black-and-white world—a black-and-white cell—bounded by thick, glossy white borders. Scores of faces, each frozen in the same moment. The moment they found themselves on skid row. The moment hope had died.

The owner of the Sourdough, a bear of a man who called himself the Pope, leaned over my shoulder. He was studying the collection of photographs he had shot and pinned to the wall over the course of a decade as if seeing them for the first time.

"Did you say he had light hair or dark hair?" the Pope said. He filtered each breath through his nose and it came out a whistle. Glenn Miller's "A String of Pearls" filtered from the bar through the cheap plywood door and came out flat.

"I didn't say, but it's dark."

It was 5:30. I'd spent the better part of the day striking out in my search for Tommy Parrish. I'd questioned dozens of bums on the street, a handful of pawnshop owners, and the desk clerk at the Senate Hotel. None of them knew who he was. All of them were liars.

The Sourdough had been my next stop after the Senate only because it was next-door. As my eyes had adjusted to the transition from outside light to inside dark, I'd felt the bleary but suspicious gaze of a loose collection of skid-row pensioners. My twenty-dollar suit hadn't gone unnoticed by the disheveled—and suddenly

C. J. Harper had his fiction debut last month in *EQMM*. We feature him now in Black Mask because of his direct homage to Chandler: His P.I. shares Marlowe's office building and has some thoughts on Marlowe's susceptibilities. Being published beside Chandler is, the author says, "a dream come true . . . because he's obviously been an enormous inspiration for me."

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quiet—patrons. As I walked up to the bar, serenaded by a scratchy version of "Begin the Beguine" on the jukebox, I heard one mutter something about a Rockefeller in their presence.

The bartender, who wore a dirty white apron that was fighting a losing battle at restraining his bloated physique, dried his hands on a wet towel as he stepped over to take my order. "I'm the Pope," he said. "What's your pleasure?"

"I'm General Eisenhower. I need you to answer a question for me." The Pope's affability seemed to reassure the clientele, because the too-loud chatter and laughter of drunken old men returned, forcing me to raise my voice. "I'm looking for somebody."

"Who are you?" he said pleasantly, still wiping his hands.

I kept up our game of twenty questions without answers. "Are you really the Pope?"

"That's my nickname around here. What do people call you?"

"Darrow Nash."

"Darrow?"

"My old man had a soft spot for lawyers and lost causes."

The Pope nodded. "So what do you do that sends you to a place like this? You the new health inspector?"

"No. I'm in from L.A." I moved from honesty to deception. "I'm looking for a buddy of mine from the Sixth Armored. What happened to the old health inspector?"

"Food poisoning. L.A. is a long way from here. Must be a damn good friend."

I lied some more. "He is. What's the best way to go about finding him around here?"

His eyes narrowed for a moment. "Why don't you take a gander at my Lost Wall." He gave his head a tilt in the direction he wanted me to go.

"Lots of people come down to skid row looking for somebody," he said as he led me through drifting clouds of cigarette smoke down a hall that stunk of dry rot. He jiggled a key in a worn-out lock and opened the door. "That's why I take everybody's picture, or at least the ones that I can. Just in case. I been doing it almost ten years."

"Why?" I said.

He framed his answer with a pair of shrugs. "Somebody's got to look after these men. If I don't, who will?" Then he'd stared at me as if I might know someone who would.

I'd shrugged back. No names had come to mind.

As we both leaned in toward the pictures, I pulled out the photograph that Dan Parrish, Tommy's brother, had sent general delivery to the Minneapolis post office. I'd picked it up that morning after

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my train had backed into the Milwaukee Road Depot. It was one taken just after the war, black-and-white, just like those on the Lost Wall. Tommy looked to be around thirty and was dressed up in his uniform, his arms stiffly at his sides, his mother leaning against his left shoulder, his father against his right. Their smiles were big. His wasn't. His hat was square and pulled low on his head, not rakish or pushed back the way most wore theirs after the war. His nose was bent to the left like a parenthesis, an old football injury according to Dan, and his eyes looked lost in their sockets. But what wasn't lost—what hadn't died in the war—looked scared. The kind of scared that looks permanent on some people.

Medals littered his chest.

The Pope gave a short whistle. "Look at all the hardware. That boy was a hero." He looked at me.

"He helped liberate Buchenwald."

"Well, that's something to be proud of."

"For most, maybe." I remembered an old poem and committed the ultimate sin by paraphrasing it. "But some souls perish in that pride."

The Pope's eyebrows jumped up. "Wordsworth."

Then his face turned stony and his eyes gazed off into the middle distance. "I thought of Chatterton, the marvelous Boy,/The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride;/Of him who walked in glory and in joy/Following his plow, along the mountain-side:/By our own spirits are we deified:/We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;/But thereof come in the end despondency and madness."

His gaze stayed away for a moment, then came back and found me. "Wordsworth."

I stared at him as I struggled over a suitable reply. He let me off the hook.

"I wanted to be a poet. I ended up here." He looked around and rolled his eyes. "Cheap drinks and dirty limericks."

"Like what?"

He told me a couple. He was right. They were dirty.

I handed him the picture of Tommy Parrish so he could take a closer look.

The Pope took in a deep breath and filled his large cheeks like Popeye. He slowly let the air out as if he was racking his brain. Then he shook his head and thrust the picture back at me. "Never seen him before."

"Are you sure? His name is Tommy Parrish."

"Yep." He started for the door. His voice rose an octave. "I've got to get back to work."

"I only ask because he looks a lot like this guy." I pointed to a photo near the right edge of the Lost Wall. It was a shot of Parrish after he'd passed out, his stubbled cheek flat against a wet table, his eyes closed.

The Pope stopped with his hand on the doorknob and leaned back, taking in the picture from a safe distance. "It's hard to tell. Faces

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change over time on skid row."

I held up my picture of Parrish next to the one the Pope had taken of him. "That's true, but you don't see a beak bent like that very often."

"Lots of broken noses on skid row, too."

I showed him my teeth. I wasn't worried he'd confuse it with a smile. "We can keep up this routine as long as you want, because I know all my lines and I know yours too. But I don't want to hear from the barkeep. I want to hear from the poet."

His eyes hardened. "And I don't want to hear some cock-and-bull story about looking for a war buddy. Tommy Parrish isn't anyone's buddy."

We eyed each other. In that moment I realized I needed his truth more than he needed mine. "I'm a private detective working a missing-person case. Now it's your turn."

The Pope let his hand fall from the knob of the closed door. His voice became a whisper. "Fair enough. Parrish isn't allowed in here anymore, so I haven't seen him in a couple of months. I don't know where you'd find him."

"What did he do to make you boot him?"

He took a long breath. "Mr. Nash, have you ever met someone with so much hate that you can no longer see the soul in their eyes?"

I'd been in the war too. "Yeah."

"That's Tommy. He'd steal from a match girl just for the fun of it."

"Don't you see that a lot around here?"

"Not really. Most of the boys are harmless. They drink too much, but their real problem is that they can't handle responsibility. They may get into fights, but they still have a heart buried somewhere beneath the dirty clothes and the scar tissue. Not Tommy. He has no heart." He shifted his considerable weight. "But like I said, I don't know where he is."

"Sure you do. Everybody tracks devils like him. Mostly out of fear. Nobody wants to cross them."

The Pope's crimson cheeks admitted the lie. He tilted his head and scratched the side of his neck. "Most nights he's at the Palms."

"The Palms?"

"The Persian Palms. The biggest clip joint this side of Chicago. He goes there for the second show if he goes there at all." His eyes squinted, showing something I hadn't expected to see from anyone on skid row: real concern. "But watch yourself. It can be a dangerous place."

The Pope's words fell on deaf ears. In that way, he really was a poet.

I hadn't eaten since breakfast on the train and it was pushing six P.M. The Senate Cafe looked passable even though it was one of those dumps where you can see the swarthy short-order cook through an open door sweating and dangling a cigarette from his lips above the food sizzling on the grill. Over the "Special"—it wasn't—of roast pork and applesauce, I thought about Tommy Parrish's brother.

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I'd met Dan Parrish on a case last fall. I'd been lured to rural Minnesota by a client who wound up dead before my train had had the chance to give the station a whistle. Dan Parrish was the sheriff who had investigated her murder. He'd taken a bullet in his shoulder for his troubles, and I'd come to respect him. I guess he must have respected me too because he'd called me in L.A. the week before to see if I'd come to Minneapolis to look for his brother.

"Tommy hasn't been the same since the war," the sheriff had told me over the hissing telephone line. "Not since Buchenwald."

The line hissed some more.

"We used to be close, but I haven't heard from him in six years."

"What was your last contact with him? In person? By telephone?"

"A letter. The return address was the Senate Hotel in Minneapolis. That's skid row, Nash."

My feet were on the desk and I was using my slouch hat as a fan. I'd stripped down to my sleeveless undershirt after the air inside my office in the Cahuenga Building had died from the heat. The phone was making my ear sweat. "But why me, Dan? What's wrong with the dicks in Minneapolis?"

"No privacy. Everybody on skid row knows them because they get hired to find people like Tommy. You'd be anonymous. You could ask around like an old war buddy."

"You don't want anyone to know you're looking for him?"

"I may be out here in Glenwood, Minnesota, Nash, but I still have a reputation to think about. I don't want to be stuck here forever. When word gets out that a cop has a wayward brother, it affects how other cops treat you. They start thinking you're soft. That you're in it to make it up to your folks. Like Pat O'Brien in *Angels with Dirty Faces,* only with a badge instead of a collar. I don't need that getting in the way."

"Whether it's true or not?"

"Yeah. It makes me look weak."

I knew from experience that he wasn't, but what good would that do him?

"Why now?"

The sigh he gave came through the line like a desert wind. "My father is dying. Despite my efforts to convince him otherwise, he insists on seeing Tommy before he dies."

"Before who dies? Tommy or your father?"

There was a long pause. "Either one. I don't think Tommy's worth the effort, but the old man won't listen to me. Never has. And I'm the good son." He managed to blend irony and sarcasm into one frustrated tone.

"Did I just catch a whiff of sibling rivalry?"

His voice took on the tenderness of high-grade blue steel. "Maybe it's just you."

I got the message and left it alone.

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Normally I don't work for free. Too many times I'd seen my pal Marlowe, another P.I. with an office on the same floor of the Cahuenga Building, risk his life for nothing more than friendship or simple justice, and I'd told him to his face that he was a sap for doing it. But I guess I'd been in his office one too many times, because it turns out being a sap is contagious.

When I agreed to go to Minneapolis, Dan offered to pay my full fee plus expenses, but I couldn't bring myself to say okay. It wasn't really friendship or justice. It was my own category. Respect.

"No charge," I'd said. Then I saw Marlowe standing in the doorway, leaning against the jamb, his feet casually crossed, his hat pushed back on his head. He had a smirk on his face and was using his index fingers to send me a near-fatal barrage of *tsk*s.

I hit the Palms just as "The Sweater Girl" was leaving the stage after her second show. From the name, she was supposed to look like Lana Turner, and she did. And the stage was supposed to look like a stage, but it didn't. It was more of a built-in corner shelf behind the bar, perched four feet above the floor on a handful of grayish four-by-fours. Neither the stage nor Lana looked terribly interested in doing their jobs. And they had one more show to go. The sign outside boasted of "3 floor shows nightly." Everyone looked like they'd had enough after two.

A thin cloud of blue smoke hovered near the pressed-tin ceiling ten feet above the heads of a couple of dozen men and women clustered along the thirty-foot bar. A couple of sweaty thugs dressed in white shirts and aprons snarled at the customers like cornered lion tamers.

The dozen or so booths on the opposite side of the large room looked dark and uninviting. I could see in a couple of them the orange pinpoints of smoldering cigarettes held in fingers that were little more than shadows. Tommy Parrish seemed like the type to operate from that kind of setting. So I went to the bar. I knew approaching him would take some finesse.

I started with the Sweater Girl. She had climbed down from the stage and had left the safety of the lion tamers behind the bar to offer herself up to the lions. She had adopted the pose of female invitation: her back to the mirror, her elbows leaning on the bar, her hands dangling, a high-heeled stiletto propped on the brass foot rail, one naked knee covered in black nylon poking out at a seductive angle. Her dress was tight and black and cut high and low in all the right places. Her hair was Lana blond, so blond it looked white. The Wednesday night crowd had apparently seen enough of her act, because they completely ignored her. I accepted her attempt at an invitation and introduced myself.

She read my clothes before she read my eyes. "Buy me a drink?"

"Whatever you want, Lana."

That sent a charge through her. She snapped her fingers toward

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one of the lion tamers without taking her eyes off of mine. "Do you see a likeness?"

"I see a lot that I likeness."

She seemed confused for a moment, then cooed and picked up one of the twin double shots of whiskey that had magically appeared at her elbow. I reached in close to pick up mine. Her breath swept over my neck like the first hot gusts that the Santa Anas send as a warning.

I tossed back the double shot. It hadn't come from the top shelf. My throat burned. I smiled through it with a sneer.

Lana tossed hers back, leaving off both the smile and the sneer. "Thanks. How 'bout another?"

I felt warm inside. "Sure." She started to snap her fingers again, but I covered her hand with mine. The move took me in close. She looked alarmed, but not panicked. "First I have a question for you. If you answer it right, you get that drink."

She nodded, her lips apart, her breath coming a little faster, the Santa Anas building.

"I'm looking for a friend. An old war buddy from the Sixth Armored by the name of Tommy Parrish. Know him?"

Her eyes darted toward the far corner of the section of booths, then came back to mine cold and distant. The Santa Anas had died out. She pulled her hand away from mine. "Never heard of him."

I stared hard at her. She stared back.

The silence got to her. "Besides," she said, doing her version of the icy Lana in *The Postman Always Rings Twice,* "one drink is my limit."

I could have pressed her for more information, but I'd always liked the Santa Anas and the sense of unease and excitement that followed in their wake. I wanted them to blow again.

"Thanks, Lana." I grabbed her hand again and wrapped her fingers around a ten-spot. "Keep the change."

Her lips parted in Lana-like surprise, but no words came out.

I left her there, her fingers weighing the scratch in her hands, her eyes weighing the darkness that lingered in the corner of one of the Palms' simmering booths.

Like a bookie collects bets, the alley behind the Palms collected loneliness. Even though a few stray vagrants drifted by as I waited, I never felt the presence of life. The only palpable presence among the trash cans and broken glass was a late-night heat and humidity that compressed the lingering stale air into an invisible solid. Air that nearly had to be swallowed. Beyond the alley, lightning flashed soundlessly in the towering gray clouds that could be seen above the black, jagged silhouette of skid-row rooftops. A rat scrambled over my foot. The first sign of life.

I'd been staking out the alley, buried in the shadows of a second-story fire escape, since I'd left the Palms. Lana had confirmed with

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her eyes that Tommy Parrish was in a booth. But I didn't go over to him, because he would have known that Lana had given him up. People pay a hard price for giving someone up. I didn't have the heart to do that to her. But I also figured she'd tell him that I was looking for him. And I knew he wouldn't want to be found. It was for just such a situation that bars had back doors.

Maybe twenty minutes had passed when the back door to the Palms pushed open and a man stepped out, his posture strong but wary. He took his time surveying the alley. He wore dark pants and a dark long-sleeved shirt. His hair was short, wavy, and dark, and his face was shadowed by a couple of days' stubble. As his head turned my way, I was close enough to see even in the dim light that it was Parrish. Time had done nothing to straighten the crook in his nose.

He moved quickly but carefully past me, keeping close to the brick walls, never thinking to look up. Each step he took was a blend of confidence and wariness. He reminded me of a G.I. going house to house in Anzio.

Once he turned the corner of the alley, I swung over the railing and climbed down the ladder to where I could manage a short drop. I reenacted my own memories of Anzio, moving with cautious speed down the alley to the sidewalk.

Out on the streets, Tommy gained the full measure of his confidence. He strode with his shoulders square in a way that seemed to invite trouble. I followed him down Washington Avenue until he stopped at an unmarked door. I ducked into a recessed storefront as he looked both ways before pulling the door open. It was on a heavy spring and slammed shut behind him.

There are times, as a P.I., when you are confronted with two choices: wait for the prey to come back out, or follow the prey into an unfamiliar, potentially dangerous building. One makes perfect sense, the other doesn't. Most people would choose the former. P.I.s, by necessity, choose the latter. If we didn't go in, the only things we'd discover by waiting outside would be that every building has a back door and that the prey is long gone. The only thing that can keep us out is a lock. And even that's more of a detour than a barrier.

I tried the knob of the nameless door. No detour would be necessary.

A long, narrow stairway led up to another unmarked door on the second floor. It was locked. Next to the jamb hung a round buzzer. I gave it the finger and heard a short ring beyond the door.

A wooden chair scraped on a wooden floor and a rectangle slid open on the door at eye level. Whatever goon had opened the peephole had a thick brow and eyes that were as blank as the wooden block he had removed. He regarded me as if I were overripe fruit.

"Beat it. We're closed."

"Then why answer the door?"

Brutus hadn't expected such a puzzler, and it was obvious that his toughness made up for his lack of intelligence.

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"I think your watch stopped," I said. Then I held up a ten-spot. "Get it fixed."

His dull black eyes flicked down at the lettuce between my fingers, then back up at me. He had some heavy thinking to do. Did I look like trouble? Would the boss have a conniption if I was let in? Could I cost him his job? Was ten bucks worth the risk?

It was.

He held his fingers up to the peephole. I fed them.

The lock snapped and the door backed open. His office was a vestibule of peeling green wallpaper, a battered wood floor, a wooden chair wearing his suit coat, and a silver smoking stand stuffed with butts. Brutus was bending over, stuffing the money into his sock. When he stood up, he had a buzzcut and the thick neck and battered face of a former boxer gone to seed. His white dress shirt, black tie, and black slacks were wrinkled and all a size too small, but the .45 in a shoulder holster under his arm looked smooth as silk and larger than life.

I started toward the third unmarked door of the night, toward whatever illicit activity required three doors, one of them locked, an armed doorman, and a bribe to get in, but Brutus grabbed my arm and gave it a viselike squeeze. "Don't do nothing to make me regret this."

"Don't worry," I said. "You'll respect me in the morning."

He let go and I opened the door to a large room that made me feel like a corpuscle: red carpet, red velvet chairs, red walls, and wall sconces draped with red scarves. Half a dozen dealers wearing red suits and ties stood at red felt-covered gaming tables, dealing to maybe two dozen desperate gamblers who, under the crimson light, looked covered in blood. I glanced down at my gray suit. It looked bloody too.

Smoky music, cracked in places, drifted over the busy room. It took me a second to recognize the singer: Billie Holiday. Pain whittled down to a voice. A sleepless soul lost in the loneliness of "Lover Man."

Tommy Parrish had found an open stool at a table in the middle of the room and was sneering at the dealer. Three other men at the table hid in the safety that came with keeping their eyes on their chips. I wandered over to within earshot. The dealer, whose face was a collection of sharp angles that ended in a V-shaped chin and who still carried signs of acne both old and new, was explaining something Parrish didn't want explained.

"I cannot give you any chips. You need to see Mr. St. Clair."

Parrish rose and leaned toward the dealer.

"You'll need to see Mr. St. Clair." The dealer's voice was beginning to shake.

"Then get him over here where I can see him."

"He works behind that window." He pointed a shaky finger toward a caged window cut into a red wall at the back. The word "Cashier"

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written in elegant neon script hung over it like an arched eyebrow.

Parrish grabbed the dealer by the knot of the dealer's red tie. "You get him."

There was no need. St. Clair was already halfway to the table. He had a face that looked like it had been carved from butter, thick and pale and slightly marbled. His hair was slicked back and his red suit was adorned with a white rose that looked pink in this light. He carried with him a frustrated manager's smile that fought the urge to turn mean. "Hands off the dealer, Parrish."

Parrish looked at St. Clair but didn't let go. "This pinhead won't give me any chips."

St. Clair stopped a good five feet from Parrish. One hand was deep in the pocket of his red suit jacket. "Mr. Baird gives out the cards. I give out the chips. You know that."

Parrish smiled without any help from his eyes, which made it a threat. "But I don't have to like it."

"Show me the cash and I'll give you your chips."

Parrish let go of Baird's tie and squared up to St. Clair. "Ever heard of credit?"

"Not since you walked in the door."

I saw Parrish inflate like a cornered animal. He clenched a fist and raised it just enough to be noticed. "Want me to show you what it looks like?"

St. Clair's arm tensed, the one that ended in his sagging coat pocket.

"I'll cover it," I said as I pulled out my wallet and withdrew a twenty. I looked at Parrish. "That enough?"

Parrish looked at me as if I'd interrupted his punch line. This was the first time I got a look at the dead eyes the Pope had described. Whatever part of him had looked scared in the old photograph I had of him was no longer visible. All that came through now was unmasked contempt. His gaze rolled over me with all the compassion of a German Panzer, finally settling on the double sawbuck in my hand. "Forty."

I pulled out three more twenties and handed all of it to St. Clair. "Forty for both of us."

St. Clair held his stiff pose for a moment, then weakened. He tried to hide it, but I spotted the relief that snuck across his face. "Forty each. Yes, sir."

Parrish dropped back onto his red stool. His wavy black hair looked greasy but unruffled.

St. Clair looked at the man sitting next to Parrish. "Carl, you've been here long enough. Go home."

Carl, who looked like a well-dressed, churchgoing politician with a predilection for sin, gladly gathered his handful of chips and headed for the caged window. The two others at the table followed suit.

St. Clair pointed at the now vacant stools and smiled at me. "A

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table has opened up for you, sir."

I nodded and took my place next to Parrish. His eyes were focused on the red felt table as if he were staring into a pool of his own blood. He rested his forearms on the edge. The cuffs of his dark shirt were frayed. "What do you want from me?"

I stared into my own blood on the table. "Nothing."

"A man wants something when he throws around money like it's trash and asks after somebody who doesn't want to be found."

"It's not me that wants something. It's your old man."

Parrish didn't move.

St. Clair brought out a rack of chips to Baird, who was using a handkerchief to wipe off his forehead and his palms. The dealer then stacked two equal towers of chips in front of each of us. I wasn't sure Parrish had heard me.

"It's your old man," I said.

"I ain't deaf," he snapped. "Deal."

Baird tried to control the shakes that seemed to have become permanent, but failed. His hand shook as he picked up a pearlhandled letter opener and tried to cut the seal on a new deck of cards. He nearly slit his own wrists. When he finally tried to deal blackjack to us, both of Parrish's cards landed faceup. He had a pair of jacks.

Parrish rose from his stool. "Goddamn it, you sonofabitch. You just cost me money." He reached across and slapped Baird full on the cheek. Baird stumbled sideways from the force of the blow and whimpered. His knees nearly buckled. "Next time I'm gonna use a fist."

"We can play it out," I said.

"No." He brushed the cards back at Baird and sat down.

We waited for Baird to compose himself and the cards.

"He's dying," I said.

Parrish's jaw pulsed as he stared at the dealer.

Baird fumbled the cards, sending some towards us and others to the floor. This time Parrish rose and used his fist. Baird went over like a tree and hit the floor hard as blood spurted from his nose. He tried to push it back in with his hands but it oozed out between his fingers. A wet, spreading stain began to darken his crotch.

St. Clair rushed from his cage and tended to Baird. He glared at Parrish but said nothing. Apparently the Pope was the only skid-row proprietor with enough sand to kick Tommy Parrish out.

Parrish sat down. "Dying of what?"

"I don't know. Dan didn't say."

"Dan." He said it with surprise and disgust, as if his brother was someone he'd disliked but had forgotten about until now.

"Dan's a hell of a cop," I said.

Parrish actually chuckled, most of it through his nose.

"I'm sure he is."

Up close to Parrish I could see the bags under his eyes. The dark circles. The shadows that lived inside his skin. They gave me an

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idea of how to reach him, of what we had in common.

"I was in the war, too. Third Battalion, 157th Regiment, U.S. 45th. I saw Anzio and Dachau." I let that hang out there for a minute.

I knew he wouldn't talk about it. I didn't want to talk about it either. But I knew I had to. Not because I had a job to do. My reasons went far beyond that.

"I hate sleep," I said as I rubbed my suddenly tired eyes. "I hate it because I never sleep alone. It's those goddamned faces. Coming at me every night. Like a carnival sideshow. Emaciated, hollow faces." My voice began to shake. "Bodies contorted. People I never knew. Faces without names. Each one different. Each one. The same."

I had to stop. My hands had started to tremble. Parrish noticed but said nothing. His hands were clasped together, fingers interlaced, knuckles white with the strain.

For a minute we both just tried to breathe.

"He's dying. He wants to see you."

Parrish turned on me, leaned in close. His whiskers looked prickly and his breath smelled of stale cigarettes. His black eyes barely contained a contempt that bordered on rage. I suddenly understood how Baird could wet himself. "Just because someone knocks, doesn't mean I have to answer the door. Now leave me alone."

He stood up and moved to the cashier's window. I followed. After he collected my forty bucks and stuffed it in his pants pocket, he turned and poked a finger into my chest. "Get the hell away from me." He started to leave but stopped. He kept his eyes on the door. "Just get the hell away from me." Then he shook his head and left.

I cashed out and followed him, but by the time I reached the street he had disappeared. As I stood on the sidewalk, Baird burst through the door, holding his bloody nose with a bloody hand, sputtering and gasping as he pushed past me and ran down Washington Avenue. His feet slapped at the pavement as he plunged deeper into the heart of skid row. I wondered where he'd end up, just how deep into the heart of skid row all that rage and fear and humiliation would take him.

I found Lana as she was leaving the Palms. She didn't act happy to see me.

"Go away, Nash." She wouldn't look at me. Her eyes stayed focused on the street. It was the seasoned look of the hunted, like a rabbit just out of the woods surveying an open field.

"You remembered my name." I tried to make it sound like a good thing.

"It's not hard." She gave me an up-from-under look. "Every time I see you I GNASH my teeth."

I answered her with a verbal rimshot. She softened with a reluctant smile.

The silent lightning I'd seen from the alley as I'd waited for

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Parrish to leave the Palms had found its voice. The thunder came and went at varying decibels, as if someone was fiddling with the volume control. The wind had picked up and carried with it the cool, metallic omen of rain. Flashes lit up the surrounding buildings and pavement of skid row. I thought of God trying to get a picture for his own Lost Wall, not of vagrants but of whole streets. Whole neighborhoods. Lana glanced up at the looming clouds with the same wariness she showed for the street.

"How was the third show?"

She flicked the back of her hand toward the Palms. "They're just a bunch of animals." She gave me a sideways glance. Like all her gestures and glances, it was straight out of a Lana Turner picture. "What do you want, Nash?"

"I talked to Parrish."

Her eyebrows arched. "And you're still alive? You must be a real sweet-talker."

"No." I thought about saying more, but I couldn't think of anything to say. Anything she'd really understand.

"So what do you want from me?"

"His address."

"You were talking to him. Why didn't you ask him yourself?"

"I didn't get the chance."

She propped her hands on her hips and eyed me like I was a sidewalk preacher hawking redemption. "Why should I trust you?"

I nodded toward the Palms. "Because I'm not like those other animals."

She thought about that for a moment. I felt a small ripple of pride that she didn't laugh in my face.

"The Minnesotan." She used a quick tilt of her head to indicate a brown brick hotel looming over the far corner across the street. It fronted on Washington Avenue with twin five-story wings in the shape of a U and columns of windows bracketed by beige pilasters. An enormous neon sign stood high above the roof blazing out in red letters: THE MINNESOTAN HOTEL. And below that, glowing in cool green, maybe its biggest—and least verifiable—selling point: FIREPROOF. A marquee sign over the single-floor lobby that linked the two wings advertised the "Panther Room" in red. Among the dozens of wooden, three-story firetraps masquerading as flophouses, The Minnesotan was a step up, but I wasn't sure by how much.

"Room three-sixteen," she said as she fiddled with an earring. "It ain't no secret."

Something clamped itself onto my heart and squeezed. I guess I hadn't wanted her to know where Parrish lived, at least not down to the room number. The fact that she did made me picture something I didn't want to see.

"You keep extra clothes there?" My teeth had stayed stuck together as I'd said it.

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Her eyes turned to flint. "None of your damn business."

I eased off my teeth. "You're right. Thanks for the news." I turned toward The Minnesotan and waited for a streetcar to pass before crossing the road to get to the other side.

"We live in the same building, that's all," she said, raising her voice so I'd hear her over the rattling roar of the trolley.

I turned toward her. The streetcar rumbled away.

She was twirling a lock of her platinum-blond hair. "I live in 401." Then she smiled a murderous smile. "I like it that you care."

I glanced up and down the street. The only people in sight were a couple of drunks trying to navigate the rough seas of the sidewalk. I tried to keep my wits about me, but Reason was already drifting down the block. He gave me a knowing smile and a tip of the hat before he turned and walked away, whistling a happy tune, content to meet up again later.

I gave her the toughest look I had. "It's a dangerous night," I said. "You should have an escort."

She walked toward me, one high-heeled stiletto placed directly in front of the other, her eyes taking on the sharp, seasoned focus of the hunter. I never asked her for her real name and she never offered it. All she had to do was what she did: look at me like the Santa Anas had returned.

Her voice turned breathy. "You never know where you might find trouble."

She offered me her arm and I took it. I knew I was making the wrong choice, but like following prey into an unfamiliar building through an unmarked door, sometimes you can't help but go where you shouldn't. That's not just a sin that P.I.s commit.

I knocked on the peeling varnish of the door to Room 316, but I had the growing sense I'd get no answer.

I'd left Lana sleeping soundly in her bed in 401. Doing three shows a night must have exhausted her, because she'd been out the minute she'd climbed off. The whole thing had taken less than ten minutes—she had the kind of body that kills self-control—but I was beginning to feel I'd been distracted too long. The storm had pounded on her window as if raging against what was going on inside. As if it could scour away with its fury the permanent stains—the permanent sins—of skid row. Ten minutes later, it still hadn't given up on its hopeless mission.

I tried the knob. The door wasn't locked.

A single lamp on the table in front of the window lit a small part of the room, leaving the rest in shadows that rose and fell with the flashes of lightning that flickered through the drawn shade. There wasn't much to light up, just a single bed, a dresser, and a padded vinyl chair that was losing its stuffing. A cigarette languished in an ashtray.

Tommy lay on his side on the floor, his front bathed in light, his

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blood making a black pool in front of him on the low-pile maroon rug. A pearl handle stuck out of his chest. It moved in irregular fits with Tommy's shallow breaths.

I kneeled at his side. "Just hold on. I'll get help."

"No need." He pushed out the words without any air to carry them.

"Baird?"

His head moved. It was as close to a nod as he could get. "He knocked. I thought it was you."

He coughed up blood that oozed out of the side of his mouth. His skin was gray and seemed to be hardening. He pushed more blood from his mouth with his tongue and choked on words that wouldn't come out. He swallowed hard, then forced out his last words on his last breath.

"I'll wait."

But he didn't.

As I turned to leave to go call for the police, something over his bed caught my eye.

Taped to the thick steel crossbar of his headboard frame was a picture. It was almost identical to the one Dan had left for me at the Minneapolis post office. It was of Tommy and his parents, taken a moment before or a moment after the one I had. Everything looked the same. His parents were smiling. Tommy was in his uniform. But one important detail was different. The one that proved why you take more than one picture. At first I didn't understand why this one was the one he'd kept for himself. But then it made perfect sense.

In this one, Tommy's eyes were closed.

Outside, the storm raged on, still battling the sins that can't be washed away.

Dan Parrish took the news like it wasn't news. There was only one part that surprised him.

"'I'll wait.' What do you think he meant by that?"

I sat forward in the battered desk chair in the back room of the Sourdough. The Pope had let me use his phone. He'd found me at eight A.M. waiting in the sun with a handful of other desperate men on the rain-scoured sidewalk in front of the bar. I took a long breath and ran a hand through my hair as I gazed at the hundreds of faces staring at me from across the room on the Lost Wall.

"All I can think of, Dan, is that he was talking about your father."

A staticky silence filled the line.

"I think he meant that he'll be waiting for your father in the next life."

Dan cleared his throat. His words trembled. "He doesn't have to wait. Pop died last night."

My heart fell. "I'm sorry, Dan."

"It's like they decided to leave together. And they hadn't said a word to each other in six years."

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We signed off shortly after that. Dan thanked me and offered again to pay for my services. Like the sap I'd become, again I said no.

The Pope came in with a bowl of beer nuts. "This is the only breakfast I can rustle up."

I thanked him and tossed a couple into my mouth. I'd been up all night. The cops had found Baird in a Panther Room booth, unconscious, blood from his nose spilling down the front of his red gambling-house suit, both eyes swollen shut. When I'd found him there half an hour before the cops, spending the forty bucks—my forty bucks—that he'd taken off Tommy as Tommy lay dying, he'd been celebrating like it was his first day of freedom. Instead, it was his last. None of the patrons in the Panther Room could recall seeing who had given Baird such a beating. It turns out that on skid row the price for silence is a round of drinks. And I still managed to walk out with ten bucks and change.

But I can't shake the fact that Tommy's death was my fault. When Reason had left me behind on the sidewalk in front of the Palms with Lana, it hadn't walked away alone. It had taken a life with it. I'd had the sense that Tommy had needed some time, but I was convinced he was coming around. Had I stuck to my job, I would have been with Tommy when Baird knocked on the door, or we might even have already been on our way to the depot and the next train to Glenwood. To his father. I would have at least been in a position to intercept Baird's knife. Maybe even to have taken the fatal blow.

Or maybe that's just wishful thinking.

I never told Dan that I'd been ten minutes late.

The Pope walked over to the Lost Wall and pointed at the picture he'd taken of Tommy Parrish five years ago.

"I guess I can take this one down." He started to pull out the thumbtack that pinned it to the wall.

"Wait," I said as I got to my feet and came up next to him. "Leave it up."

The Pope looked at me.

I looked at Tommy's picture, his eyes the color of slate. The color of hope that has died. "I don't think he was ever really found."

The Pope lifted his eyebrows and nodded. "Fair enough." He looked at Tommy and the rest of the faces on the Lost Wall. "Wordsworth."

Then he headed back out to the bar to a jukebox that was stuck repeating the same two notes like the incessant chirping of an early morning bird. I heard the Pope give the machine a kick. The song picked up again several notes later.

I stared at the Lost Wall. Stared at all the skid-row faces. So different from the ones that haunted me from Dachau, yet so much the same.

Hollow faces with leaden gray eyes.

Lost faces.

The kind that can only be found in dreams. ●

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Art by Ron Buccalo

Four Hundred Rabbits

by Simon Levack

The Dance of the Four Hundred Rabbits was a part of the midwinter Festival of the Raising of Banners, a time when we Aztecs honoured our war god, Huitztilopochtli, the Hummingbird of the South. While warrior captives were having their hearts torn out in front of the war god's temple at the top of the Great Pyramid, a more genial ritual was being enacted nearby, in honour of the gods of sacred wine.

The priest named Two Rabbit presided over the temple of the god whose name he bore. He called together dancers, young men from the Houses of Tears, the priests' training schools. Each dancer represented one of the four hundred lesser gods of sacred wine, the Four Hundred Rabbits.

The task of organising the proceedings fell to Two Rabbit's deputy, Patecatl. It was his job to set up the jars of sacred wine that were at the heart of the ceremony and to lay out drinking straws ready for the dancers at the end of their performance. For the climax of the dance was the moment when their graceful, sinuous movements broke up and they fell greedily upon the jars and the drinking straws, every man jabbing his neighbour with knee and elbow and fist in his eagerness to be first.

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There were four hundred dancers and fifty-two jars. But there were only two hundred and sixty straws, and of those, only one was bored through. Among the four hundred young men who had been picked for this ceremony, one alone would stand with a hollow reed at a jar of sacred wine, happily drinking his fill.

It was a game of chance, but also a ritual, watched closely by Two Rabbit and Patecatl for clues to the will of the gods. Two hundred and sixty was the number of days in our sacred calendar, and fifty-two the number of years between the ceremonial kindling of one new fire and the next. To see which young man seized the right straw and which jar he drank from might give the priests a clue to what lay in the future for our people.

Unless somebody tried to shorten the odds.

Simon Levack's writing career was launched when he won the Crime Writers Association of Britain's Debut Dagger Award. The book introduced his series character Yaotl, an Aztec slave. Yaotl now appears in a fourth novel entitled *Tribute of Death*, published in 2007 by Lulu Enterprises UK. What a treat that this series, which the *Guardian* calls "always gripping and surprising," now includes short stories.

"Move yourself, slave!"

I scrambled to my feet, narrowly avoiding the kick my master's steward had casually aimed at me while I bolted what was left of my warm tortilla. The sweet girl from the palace kitchen who had passed it to me fresh from the griddle backed away into a corner, her eyes wide with sudden fear, but the big bully did not berate her for wasting bread on me. Nor did he demand to know what I was doing or hurl some witless insult at me, which was unusual. Instead, with a curt "Come with me!" he turned and stalked away.

"Thanks a lot, Huitztic," I grumbled. I glanced over my shoulder but the girl had fled. "We were getting along nicely there, too. . . ."

I hung back, preparing to dodge the kick that a remark like that would normally provoke, but all the response I got was, "This is no time for jokes. His Lordship has something to show you."

That was restrained by the steward's standards. Intrigued, I caught him up, and noticed that he was sweating. It was a cold, clear morning, when the frost lay late on the earth and the sky above the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan was a blue so bright it hurt the eyes, yet his brow was beaded with moisture, glittering in the sunshine.

"In here." He led me into a courtyard. "Your slave Yaotl, my Lord!" he announced in a loud whisper.

The enclosure was dark, surrounded by high walls the Sun had yet to clear, and the only warmth and light in it came from a squat brazier at its centre. I paused, squinting into corners while my eyes

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adjusted and I tried to make out what it was I was meant to see.

The feeble glow of the coals set off my master's features perfectly, picking out every line and wrinkle in his gnarled old face, but making his bright, ferocious eyes shine. Lord Feathered in Black, the chief minister, chief justice, and chief priest of the Aztecs, the second most powerful man in Mexico-Tenochtitlan and perhaps the most dangerous, did not trouble to greet me. Instead he leaned forward in the high-backed wicker chair that was an emblem of his rank, clutching his jaguar-skin mantle around him, and snarled: "Look at the boy—the rabbit, here. Tell me what happened to him."

I followed his gaze and saw for the first time that there was a young man sprawled against the courtyard wall. His legs were splayed like an infant's. In the poor light, his skin looked sallow and unhealthy, and a trickle of saliva glittered like silver leaf on his chin. His eyes were open, but as I looked more closely I realized he saw nothing through them. Their pupils were huge black disks that stayed fixed on something far away when I passed a hand in front of them. His breath had a sour reek that I knew well. He had been drinking sacred wine. Perhaps he had been celebrating: I noticed that he was missing the single lock of hair that boys grew at the napes of their necks, and this was a sign that he had taken his first captive in battle, and could call himself a warrior.

Why had my master called him "the rabbit"?

I felt a moment of panic as I struggled to answer His Lordship's question. The old man was not renowned for his patience.

It was the steward who saved me, unwittingly. With a sudden nervous giggle he called out: "Come on, Yaotl. What's he taken? You're the expert!"

I stiffened indignantly at the taunt. Huitztic knew my past: how I had sold myself into Lord Feathered in Black's service, trading my freedom for the sum of twenty large cloaks, enough to keep me in drink when I had nothing left but the breechcloth wrapped around my loins. He knew also what had first driven me to seek refuge in a gourd of sacred wine: the despair and humiliation of being expelled from the priesthood, years before. As a priest I had learned and experienced the use of every kind of leaf, herb, seed, and root, everything a man could put into his body to turn him into a slobbering imbecile. The steward's comment was a deliberate jibe, and it stung, but even as I bit back my retort I realized the oaf had given me the clue I needed.

My master responded before I could. "Be quiet, you idiot," he snapped. "You're in enough trouble over this already! Yaotl, I want your answer before I have both of you strangled!"

"He's been drinking," I said hastily. "That's obvious, I can smell it. But it's not just that. Sacred wine wouldn't leave him like this. He'd just have been violently sick and then fallen asleep, and by now he'd have a sore head and a tongue like tree bark. Anyway, you

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didn't send for me to tell you he's got a hangover. He's had something else—mushrooms, perhaps: the Food of the Gods. But I don't understand ... ." I hesitated before turning to look at the grim-faced old man in the chair. "What's he to you, my Lord? Why do you need to know what happened?"

"Isn't it enough that some prankster chose to break up the Dance of the Four Hundred Rabbits—a religious ceremony, and me the chief priest? But it just so happens that this young fool is my great-nephew. So I take what happened rather personally."

The Dance of the Four Hundred Rabbits! In the years since I had left the priesthood I had all but forgotten about it, but it came back to me now. And the young man had reeked of sacred wine, which could mean only one thing. "Your great-nephew won the contest?"

The chief minister's deathly features twisted into something resembling a smile. "His prize turned out to be more than he expected—as you have confirmed for me. Now you'll find out the rest—how it happened, and who was responsible." He cast a sideways glance at his steward, who squirmed grotesquely. "You and Huitztic will look into this together."

I had to repress a groan. Being made to investigate what sounded like a childish trick would be bad enough without having that vicious buffoon of a steward for company.

"I will not be made a fool of." I noticed with a thrill of dread that my master's voice had dropped to a whisper, a sign of his rage. "I will not have my family made fools of. Somebody did this to young Heron here to spite me. After you've brought me his name, I'll have him cursing the gods for ever letting him be born!"

"What are you in trouble for?"

We were barely out of earshot of Lord Feathered in Black. The moment we were dismissed, Huitztic strode on ahead as before with barely a backward glance. I hung back until I judged I was out of range of his fists before I dared mention the thing that had most intrigued me about the interview we had just had: the steward's obvious fear and our master's equally evident anger with him.

I had miscalculated. The man spun on his heel and his long, powerful legs brought him back to me in two steps. Before I could react he had the knot of my cloak in his fist and was twisting it, tightening the rough cloth around my neck until I could feel my skin burning under it and was struggling to breathe.

"Let's get one thing clear, you little worm." Spittle flew into my face as he dragged it closer to his. "I am not the one in trouble. I only did what he told me to. It was Patecatl who let him down, not me, and I'm not going to let you talk the old man into believing otherwise. I'll cut your tongue out if I catch you even thinking about it!"

"Patecatl?" I managed to gasp. "You mean the priest?"

"He's already in prison. That's where we're going now—to see if

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they've sweated the truth out of him yet. Maybe you can think of some clever way of tricking him into giving it to us. If you can't, then you'd better just keep your mouth shut. Old Black Feathers may have told me I had to have you trailing around after me like a lost dog, but I don't have to like it!" He let go with a snarl, thrusting me away from him so hard that I fell over backwards, my legs buckling under me.

"The priest's in prison?" I repeated as I got up. I had to run to keep pace with him as he made off into the street outside our master's palace. "What for, though? You may as well tell me what you think he did."

Huitztic ignored my suggestion until he was brought up short by one of the city's countless canals. As he looked right and left for a boat that could take us to the prison, he apparently had second thoughts. Wrinkling his nose as though he had caught a whiff of the green water at his feet, he muttered: "All right. I may as well, since we've got to see him together. But you remember what I said. I only did what I was told!"

"So how do you think Heron managed to win the contest?" the steward asked as he flopped angrily into the stern of the boat.

"It wasn't just luck, then?" I had already guessed that if the gods had willed the outcome, they had had some human help to arrange it.

"Only if having one of the most powerful men in the world for your great-uncle counts as luck. Actually, old Black Feathers can't stand the young toad, but he dotes on his niece—the boy's mother—and she wants to see her son get to the top."

"And winning a contest like this won't do the lad's career any harm." To be marked with the gods' favour counted for almost as much as taking a captive in war. "So our master ordered you to give him a helping hand, is that it?"

Huitztic gripped the boat's sides so hard his knuckles turned white. "Me and the priest both. Young Heron had the only hollow drinking-tube sewn into the hem of his cloak, after I'd been to get it from Patecatl. Only I reckon it had more than a hole in it. How hard would it have been for him to prime it before he gave it to me?"

I thought about it. "Not hard. Mushrooms, you could dry them, grind them into powder, and as long as you didn't pack them in too tight I suppose the young man could have sucked it up with the sacred wine without noticing—at least until it started to work. Did anyone look at the tube afterwards?"

"Sure. Heron was still clutching it when he was brought here. But the poison was all gone by then, of course."

"It would have been a lot simpler to put the stuff in the jar, wouldn't it?"

Huitztic sniggered. "You're not so clever after all, are you? Which jar would you put it in, then?"

I grasped his meaning: How could the poisoner have known

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which of the fifty-two vessels to dope? "All of them?"

"No. Lord Feathered in Black let some of his serfs drink the rest of the jars dry. You missed an opportunity there! They could barely stand up afterwards, of course, but it was nothing like what happened to Heron."

I frowned. "The rest of the jars?"

"Heron had polished off the jar he was drinking out of before the stuff started taking effect. So we can't tell what may have been in it."

I was still puzzled. Cheating the gods was a fearful thing to do, but at least their vengeance was uncertain, and might be a long way off. I could not understand why a priest who had agreed to do that would go on to risk the immediate and all-too-certain consequences of angering Lord Feathered in Black.

Perhaps I was about to find out; for the long stone wall of the prison now loomed above us.

I knew the prison. I had been confined here once, awaiting punishment after my arrest for drunkenness. I had to halt on the threshold for a moment, clutching the doorway and shutting my eyes as the sights, sounds, and smells came back to me in a rush: the lines of cramped wooden cages stretching away into the gloom, the stench of piss and fear and starvation, the shouting. At almost any time of the day or night, as I remembered, somebody would be raving, protesting his innocence or hurling abuse at the guards or calling for his mother, and when he fell silent others would take up the cry, screaming or crying and rattling the wooden bars of their cages hopelessly.

Somebody was shouting now. The words seemed to run into one another as they echoed through the long hall, so that I could not make them all out.

Huitztic shoved me from behind. "Get a move on, before I have them lock you up too!"

I stumbled forward, almost colliding with the guard who had come to find out what we wanted. When we had told him he said: "Good thing you're here. Maybe you can make him shut up."

My master's steward laughed harshly. "Just bash him over the head! That ought to do it."

The guard, a stolid-looking man in a veteran warrior's long cloak and embroidered breechcloth, hefted his cudgel and gave us a lopsided grin. "I don't think so. I don't want to have to explain to my chief why I laid out Two Rabbit."

I frowned. "I thought it was his deputy you had in here."

"It is. But the prisoner's chief came to pay him a visit. And he's the one shouting."

We hurried past the rows of cages, ignored or tracked obsessively by the wretches who squatted in them. At our approach, the shouting seemed to reach a crescendo, before dying out abruptly as the tall, slender figure standing in front of one of the cages swung

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his gaunt face towards us.

If he not been making so much noise, I might have missed him altogether. As a priest, he was draped in black, and had stained his face and limbs with pitch, so that in the gloom there was little to see of him but his eyes, which were wide and startlingly pale.

The guard stepped forward. "Now, Two Rabbit," he urged, "there's no need for this. You'll start them all off, and that'll bring my chief running, and I'll never hear the end of it."

The priest turned back to the cage and kicked it hard enough to make the bars rattle. There was a rustle of movement in response, but with Two Rabbit between us I could not clearly see the occupant.

"Hey!" the guard yelled. "Be careful, that's government property!"

"Do you know what this creature did?" the priest rasped. The words burst between his tightly compressed lips like steam from a green log thrown on a fire.

Huitztic pushed himself forward. "We know exactly what he did!" he cried eagerly. "And my master's going to see him punished for it!"

"Your master?" The pale eyes narrowed. "But you're Lord Feathered in Black's steward, aren't you?"

"That's right, and the chief minister will . . ."

We never found out what the chief minister was going to do, because his steward's words were drowned by the other man's outraged howl. "Lord Feathered in Black! He's as guilty as this vermin here. He ought to be in that cage with him!"

"Now, steady on," the guard said anxiously. "That's dangerous talk."

"As dangerous as mocking the gods? As dangerous as making a laughingstock of their priests?" With a last, baleful glance at the cage, he moved, pushing past us before stalking out of the hall. "He won't get away with it! Tell him that from me!"

Huitztic said nothing. It was the man in the cage who spoke next.

"Yaotl? Is that you?"

Everybody appeared to be staring at me: Huitztic, the prison guard, even the desperate, hollow-eyed prisoners in the shadows around us. They all seemed to be saying: You know this person? And the tone in which they seemed to be saying it was not friendly.

"You must remember me, Yaotl. We trained together." With Two Rabbit gone, I could see his former deputy clearly now. Patecatl had pushed his hand between the bars of the cage in an imploring gesture.

At first I could only gaze at him while I tried to work out where he might have seen me before. When the answer came to me I could only whisper: "Fire Snake?"

"Yes!" the man cried eagerly, straining against the wooden bars until they creaked. "Fire Snake, that's right! Your old pal. Listen, you've got to get me out of here."

Fire Snake: a name from my childhood, from the House of Tears,

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the harsh school for boys who would be priests. We had not known each other well or liked each other much, but if I had been where he was, I too might have looked upon any familiar face as a long-lost friend's.

Huitztic interrupted before I had a chance to reply. " 'Get you out of here'?" He took a step towards the cage and swung his foot at it, making the prisoner leap backwards as the wooden bars rattled for a second time.

"Will you leave my bloody cage alone?" the guard yelled.

Ignoring him, the steward went on ranting at the prisoner. "This slave isn't going to get you out of anything! All he's here for is to listen to you tell us how you poisoned Heron. Go on, how did you do it? How did those mushrooms get into that tube?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" the man in the cage protested. "Anyway, I'm not telling you anything. It's your fault I'm in here. You set me up!"

"You'll talk, or I'll . . . I'll . . ." Huitztic lunged at the cage, grasping the bars and shaking them impotently. "Let me at him! It's time we got him out of there and knocked the truth out of him!"

"You keep away," the guard warned. "Nobody touches my prisoners without orders."

"This is ridiculous!" Huitztic spluttered. "Don't you know I work for the chief minister?"

"So do I," the guard pointed out.

Just then Fire Snake spoke up. "I'll talk to Yaotl. No one else."

"Who asked you?" the steward snapped. "We'll make you talk!"

"How are you going to do that?" I inquired. "The guard won't let you torture him."

The steward turned on the guard resentfully. "What kind of a prison are you running here, anyway?"

"We usually just starve them," the other man offered. "A few days without food loosens their tongues, and it's much less messy than mutilation."

"We haven't got a few days!"

"I'll talk to Yaotl," the man in the cage offered quietly.

"Why don't you leave him to me?" I suggested. "Lord Feathered in Black told me to investigate this business, didn't he? So let me do it."

"This man's a friend of yours!" the steward objected. "You just want to get him off and put me in that cage instead!"

It was a tempting thought, but all I said was: "Then leave the guard here. He'll tell you if we start hatching any conspiracies."

"This had better be good," I told the man crouching on the other side of the bars, "otherwise Huitztic's likely to talk the old man into having me move in there with you."

The steward had stormed off, declaring that he was going to see

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what the chief minister had to say about this, and that he would be back.

Fire Snake peered up at me miserably. "But he's the man who set this thing up! You've got to help me, Yaotl!"

I glanced uneasily at the guard, who was pacing about the hall, snarling at his other charges as if it would help him keep them in order. I suspected he was wondering whether it would not after all have been wiser to have looked the other way while Huitztic beat a confession out of his prisoner.

"Old Black Feathers sent me here for a reason," I replied, speaking half to myself. "If he wanted you roasted over a slow fire for what happened to his great-nephew, then you'd be cooking already. I think I'm here because he doesn't know what happened himself and he doesn't believe what he's been told about it."

"So you think I've got a chance?" he demanded eagerly, his hands gripping the bars.

"Only if you tell me the truth. I can't convince the old man otherwise. Did you put the poison in that straw?"

"No!"

"How did it get there then?"

"Huitztic must have done it!"

"You're going to have to do better than that," I said a little testily. "It's just your word against his. Who's the chief minister going to believe, you or his own steward?" And more to the point, I thought, what would the steward do to me if I accused him without evidence?

Fire Snake looked at the floor. "I don't know what happened," he admitted. "That straw was clean when I gave it to the steward. I remember holding it up to the light, to check it had been bored right through. There was nothing there."

"Why did you agree to help Heron cheat? Two Rabbit was right—you were making a mockery of the ceremony. Did you expect the gods to be happy about that?"

"Lord Feathered in Black isn't afraid of the gods," he muttered. "His steward made it pretty clear what would happen to me and my family if I didn't cooperate. He even had the cheek to suggest I make whatever sacrifices were needed to assuage the gods' anger afterwards!" The bitterness in his voice was unmistakable, and for the first time I felt a pang of sympathy for him.

"I know what it looks like," he added wretchedly. "I was there when they tested all those jars, right up until the last slave started snoring and they took me away. If any of the sacred wine was poisoned, it was only the jar Heron drank out of, and how could anyone have known which one that would be? It has to have been the tube, but I wasn't the one who put the stuff in it."

"There's no way he could have taken the stuff before the dance? Or during it?"

"No chance. Someone would have noticed him munching on

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mushrooms between dance movements, and if he'd had them before it started he wouldn't have been standing up by the end."

"Then somebody must have poisoned the sacred wine," I said. I had been stooping over the cage. Now I stood up briskly. "It has to have been one or the other, doesn't it? The straw or the pot. Did you see anybody else doing anything to the pot Heron drank from?"

"No, but there were so any of them clambering over each other and pushing each other out of the way it was hard to see anything clearly."

I imagined the climax of the ceremony: fifty-two clay pots in the middle of a violent, heaving mass of eager young men. Even if one of them had been able to guess which jar Heron would drink out of, how had he managed to slip the poison into it without anyone noticing?

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the guard moving purposefully towards us. Our conversation was almost over. As I turned to leave, however, one last thought struck me. "Could Heron have told anyone about the edge you and Huitztic had given him? Someone with a motive to interfere?"

Fire Snake uttered a gasp of laughter. "I can think of three hundred and ninety-nine men who had a motive!" he said. "Four hundred if you count Two Rabbit."

"Why him?"

"You heard him just now. He thinks the gods have been mocked and he's been made a fool of. And he blames me. He's never liked me, says I'm too ambitious."

"Heron's hardly likely to have told Two Rabbit what he was planning, though, is he?"

Fire Snake scowled for a moment, as if in disappointment. "I suppose not. He could have boasted about it to someone else, though."

"Who would that be—one of the other young men? One of his rivals in the competition? I don't think so. Is there anyone else?"

"I don't know . . . I think he has a girl. But I don't know where you'd find her."

A cough at my shoulder told me it was time to move on.

I crept furtively about my master's palace, peering cautiously in before I would look into a room, keeping to the shadows as I skirted the edges of courtyards, taking cover when I needed to behind acacia bushes, yucca plants from the lowlands, and other greenery. I did not want the steward to see me until I had reported to the chief minister, and I would not be ready to do that until after I had spoken to Heron. I assumed he was still at the palace, since I suspected that even if he had recovered consciousness, he was unlikely to be in fit state to go wandering off for a while yet. I wondered whether he would cooperate if I asked him whom he had told about the trick. If he did not, then I had no idea what I would do. I did not seem to have learned anything useful from Fire Snake.

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I wondered about the girl the priest had mentioned. A young man like Heron, with his noble connections and fresh from his first triumph on the battlefield, might have his pick of the girls from the pleasure houses. From what I had heard, though, it sounded as though he had a more settled arrangement than that. If she knew about the young man's attempt to cheat the gods, I had to find out; and then I would need to know whom she might have told the secret to.

I was padding as silently as I could along a dark colonnade when a sudden sound stopped me in my tracks: a loud groan, a cry of pain.

The noise appeared to be coming from a nearby courtyard. As I crept towards it, I heard it again, but this time it was shut off abruptly, and replaced by something quite different: a woman's voice, hissing furiously: "It's no use moaning and expecting me to feel sorry for you. What happened was your own fault!"

"How do you make that out? I didn't put mushroom powder in that jar myself, did I?"

I grinned. It seemed as though I need look no further for Heron or his girl.

"If you hadn't tried to cheat, it wouldn't have happened!"

"How was I supposed to win if I didn't cheat? And please don't shout, Precious Flower."

The girl had not raised her voice above a whisper, but clearly the sacred wine and the mushrooms had not quite worn off, so it probably sounded to Heron as though a Master of Youths were shouting orders into his ear. I peeped around the corner to watch them. He lay stretched out on a stone bench with a cloth over his head. The girl, a tall, slim beauty in a fine cotton blouse and skirt, stood over him with her arms folded. Her hair was loose, like a pleasure girl's, but there was no red stain around her mouth and no sign of the yellow ochre that pleasure girls wore to lighten their skins.

Heron raised his head a little, thought better of it, and let it drop again. Hastily Precious Flower stooped to put her hand under it to stop it striking the bare stone.

"Anyway," he mumbled ungratefully, "how did they find out what I was going to do? You must have told them!"

She stepped away from him, probably wishing she had let the hard limestone knock some sense into his skull after all. "It would serve you right if I did!" she cried indignantly. "You would keep boasting about having an edge over the others!"

Heron squirmed, either in pain or anger, but did not get up. Instead he turned his head to glare at the girl. "I knew it!" he snapped. "Who did you tell, you bitch? Was it Firstborn Son or Owl?"

I watched shock and hurt cross the girl's features, making her blink in time to the young man's words. "No, I . . ."

I decided I had heard enough. Strolling into the courtyard I said, deliberately loudly: "You're absolutely sure it wasn't the steward who poisoned you, then?"

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The girl squealed and darted to one side. Heron gasped, squirmed again, and fell onto the floor in a tangle of limbs and soiled cloth.

I smiled at the girl. "I'm Yaotl. His great-uncle told me to find out what had happened."

She stared at me through big, moist eyes. "I don't understand."

"Did you tell anyone about the trick with the tube?"

"She must have done!" the young man protested, heaving himself back onto his seat. "How else did they know to put the mushrooms in that jar?"

"Oh, shut up," I told him. I looked at the girl.

She did not lower her eyes. "No," she replied firmly. "I didn't, and I will eat earth." She bowed down and touched the ground with a fingertip, then put it to her mouth, in the gesture that was an Aztec's most sacred oath.

The young man was sitting up now, with his knees slightly apart, and seemed to be watching something fascinating on the ground between them. "It can't have been Huitztic," he said indistinctly. "He's my pal. Keeps my great-uncle off my back—covers up for me when I'm out late. When the old man's gone and I get my share of his lands, there'll be something in it for old Huitztic—he knows that."

"So he expects to profit from your advancement?"

"That's it," the youngster said eagerly. He looked up. "The old man told me you were a priest, so you know what winning that contest would mean, especially now that I've taken my first captive." I wondered whether that had been arranged for him too. "Why would Huitztic want to screw it up for both of us?"

It made sense, I realized. I realized something else, too: My master was too shrewd not to know what was going on between his steward and his great-nephew. That was why I had been told to look into it with Huitztic. Old Black Feathers had not been able to think of any explanation for what had happened that did not implicate the steward, but he had not been able to work out what Huitztic's motive for humiliating his great-nephew might have been either.

"So who else did you tell, apart from Precious Flower here?"

"I didn't! And I'll eat earth too, if you want!"

"Don't bother. Just tell me about those two you mentioned—Owl and Firstborn Son. Who are they, young toughs like you?"

"That's right. Thought they were my friends, too, but Owl in particular . . ." He shot a venomous look at the girl.

"What was I supposed to do?" she cried out, colouring. "He asked for me. I'm a pleasure girl, Heron, I'm not allowed to save myself for you, you know that!" And then, suddenly, she burst into tears. "It wasn't me, really it wasn't. I wouldn't tell anyone, even though I was angry with you. And I was only angry because you kept boasting about what you were going to do!"

As she went to embrace him, and he allowed her to, I decided it was time to withdraw. I had learned all I was going to here, and I

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had seen enough of Heron's smirking, winking face.

I decided it was time I paid a visit to the temple of the god of sacred wine.

To my surprise, the temple was deserted. As I approached its precinct I had to shoulder my way through the city's usual evening crowd—traders taking unsold goods back from the marketplaces, youngsters going home from the Houses of Youth, labourers returning from the fields—but as soon as I was within the walls, all the bustle and noise was gone, replaced by a strange, echoing silence. The sudden change gave the place a forlorn air, added to by the way it had been left. Normally the flagstones would have been carefully swept, but not today. It did not appear to have been touched since the chaotic events of the previous afternoon. The large pottery jars stood where they had been put out for the dancers, mostly empty now but still filling the air around them with a stale, sour smell. On the ground around them were scattered the reeds, apparently lying where they had been dropped. Some were slightly flattened, probably squashed by the young men as they squabbled over them. Here and there a scrap of torn cloth or a severed sandal strap showed where a fight had broken out.

I had been hoping to find the head priest, Two Rabbit, here, but he was clearly not coming back today. I noticed that the brazier in front of the temple, which ought to have been permanently lit, had gone out. I wondered whether after what had happened, the priest was afraid that the gods might have withdrawn their favour. Maybe he thought the place was now unlucky. I remembered that Lord Feathered in Black had sent his serfs to taste the sacred wine that had been left in the pots, but presumably he did not care what curses he might bring down on their heads.

I shivered. I felt suddenly sick, not with fear but from the smell of all that sacred wine. Some of the old craving had returned, and I was glad the pots were empty, because my body had started telling me that what I needed at that moment was a drink.

"I'm wasting my time," I muttered, kicking at the straws scattered at my feet. "I got nothing out of Heron and his girl, and there's nothing here either. I still don't even know how they managed to get the poison into that jar, never mind who did it." For a few moments I pretended to look for clues, although I had no idea what I hoped to find: something that looked like powdered mushrooms, perhaps. I soon gave up in disgust.

"Nothing here," I repeated. "Just fifty-two empty pots and two hundred and sixty straws no one could drink out of." I thought about that. "No, two hundred and fifty-nine, of course."

Then I thought about it again.

I looked at the straws scattered around me, now looking pale as bones in the gathering dusk. I whispered a curse, and then set to

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gathering them, scooping them up in handfuls and carrying them to a corner.

After I had taken a last look around to ensure that none had rolled away unnoticed, I began to count them.

By the time I had finished my task, sorting the reeds into thirteen neat piles, the light in the plaza was too poor to see by, and I was working by touch, stooping to put the last few straws in place. I finished the job in haste. Night and the things that haunted it frightened me less than they did most Aztecs—my priest's training helped with that—but there was something about this place that unnerved me, making me feel as though I were being watched. I wanted to be done as soon as I could.

By the time I had finished, however, I knew how the chief minister's great-nephew had been poisoned, and I could make a good guess at who might have done it. I had to smile as I thought about the trick: It was clever and somehow fitting.

I could feel my smile fading as I contemplated the report I would have to give my master. I remembered the vain young man I had seen arguing with the pleasure girl, Precious Flower, and wondered whether the person who had decided to teach him a lesson truly deserved whatever brutal punishment Lord Feathered in Black had in mind. But I could not see what I could do to prevent it without bringing the old man's wrath down on my own head.

There was no sound in the courtyard that I could hear. Nonetheless the sensation that I was not alone would not go away. I could feel it as a tingling at the nape of my neck and a coldness beyond the chill of the evening air.

I turned to go, expecting to feel my way out of the plaza. However, I had not taken three steps before I bumped into something large and hard.

"Hey . . . !"

The thing moved. Suddenly I was lifted off my feet, the breath squeezed out of me in a bear hug. I heared a man's voice, very low but clear: "So the priest told you, did he?"

I struggled, lashing out with my feet but kicking only empty air. I wanted to shout but had no breath to do it with.

"Where is it?" the man holding me hissed. "You found it, didn't you? What have you done with it?"

All I could manage by way of reply was a strangled gasp. My assailant's grip slackened a little when he realised that I could not answer his questions unless he stopped trying to suffocate me.

I thought quickly. "It's all right," I croaked, using up the little air he allowed me. "I know what happened. It was Huitztic, the steward! He put the poison in—I've got the proof!"

It did not work. The powerful arms gripped me tighter than ever. I felt dizzy. Coloured lights began to dance before my eyes.

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Then another man spoke, from somewhere in the shadows. I knew the voice instantly.

"Who's that? Yaotl? What's going on?"

The man holding me dropped me on the ground.

As I fell, crashing backwards onto the flagstones, my lungs filled up and I was able to yell: "Huitztic, stop him!"

The steward did not understand. "There you are!" he bellowed triumphantly. "I know your game. You thought you'd hide from me until you'd made up a pack of lies to tell to Lord Feathered in Black. I'll see you dead before you pin this thing on me!"

I groaned aloud. "No—you idiot!—quick, stop that bastard before he runs away!"

A foot flew out of the night and slammed into my shoulder. I gasped in pain. I drew breath to call out again but then I heard the sound of running feet, moving away.

Huitztic yelled: "Got you, you miserable slave—wait, who are you?"

His words turned into a cry of pain as the young man who had assaulted me hit him.

After that there was a long silence, broken only by the steward's painful whimpering.

"So which one was that?" I wondered out loud, while I nursed my bruised throat. "Was it Owl or Firstborn Son, do you think?"

There was no answer.

"I think we'd better go and see old Black Feathers now," I continued, "and if you don't say anything about how both you and that young fool tried to silence me, then I won't."

My master received me alone, seated in his favourite place, under the magnolia on the roof of his palace. We left the steward in the courtyard below to fret and pace about nervously. He still thought I was going to accuse him, but I knew that would not do for the old man. He wanted proof.

I showed him what I had brought from the temple. It was, I had guessed, the thing the young man who had attacked me had been after: the one reed out of the two hundred and sixty I had found that had seemed lighter than the rest. As he held it up to peer at the Moon through it, I told him what had happened.

"There were four hundred dancers, two hundred and sixty straws, and fifty-two jars," I began.

"Yes, yes, I know," he replied absently, still squinting through the tube.

What I said next got his full attention, however. "Wrong! There were two hundred and sixty-one straws—and two of them were bored through. The one your great-nephew had, and this one."

"No, that doesn't make sense. If two of them had cheated, one of the others would have become intoxicated—or worse, if he'd drunk from the same jar as Heron."

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"He was at the same jar as Heron, my Lord. He didn't drink, though. He must have smuggled that tube in just as Heron did, but he never intended to suck through it. He blew."

My master's sharp eyes glittered as he stared at me.

"That ceremony always turns into a riot. There's no time for anyone to check whether the tube they've got is hollow or not, if they're lucky enough to be able to lay hands on one at all. So you'll always get several young men sucking away at each jar, most of them due to be disappointed. The one who poisoned your great nephew knew that and took advantage of it. He stuck close to Heron with a hollow reed full of powdered mushrooms, knowing nobody would think anything of it if he dipped his reed in the same jar. He blew the poison in just as Heron was slurping the stuff up."

Lord Feathered in Black looked at the tube with distaste. "Clever," he conceded. "But if what you say is right, then how do we know which of them it was?"

"I don't think we ever will," I replied carefully. I was sure it had been either Owl or Firstborn Son who had attacked me, but I did not blame him. He must have been terrified when he found out how hard the chief minister had taken his prank.

"Well, at least we know where he got the straw from," the chief minister said.

"We do?"

"Two Rabbit. He vanished yesterday, just after you saw him at the prison. Collected a few things from his lodging at the temple and hasn't been seen since. I don't suppose he ever will be again, at least not in Mexico."

I found Fire Snake looking none the worse for his brief stay in the prison.

"You did it! Well done, Yaotl—thank you, old friend, thank you! I shan't forget this. . . ."

"I wish you would," I said shortly.

"If there's ever anything I can do . . ."

I looked at his eager face, the grin white against the pitch he used to stain it, and felt disgusted. The gods had been affronted, but all that mattered to Fire Snake was that he had got away with it. "Just tell me something," I said quietly. "How did Two Rabbit know what you and Heron had done?"

The effusion of words abruptly halted. He hesitated before saying: "But we talked about that. Didn't he learn it from someone Heron had been bragging to? What about that girl?"

"Precious Flower didn't talk. I've met them both. She didn't like what Heron had done but there's no way she'd betray him. That young fool doesn't deserve her."

"Well, then . . ."

"In fact," I went on, "it seems to me there's only one person who

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could or would have told him, expecting him to do exactly what he did. His assistant, the one he thought was too ambitious. You knew how this was likely to turn out, didn't you? When that young man attacked me—I still don't know who it was, by the way, and I don't want to—he said he thought the priest had told me what happened. At first I thought he meant you, but he was talking about Two Rabbit. Your chief gave one of Heron's rivals a tube full of sacred mushrooms, but he only did it because he knew what Heron was going to do. And he can only have learned of that from you."

"That's absurd!" Fire Snake protested, but I could hear the tremor in his voice.

"No, I think it's quite clever. You didn't actually poison young Heron but you found a way to bring it about. The possibility of implicating poor old Two Rabbit must have made it even sweeter for you. Of course, it went a bit wrong when you were arrested—you didn't expect that, I'd guess—but it all turned out well in the end, didn't it? Will they make you chief priest now, I wonder?"

He clutched anxiously at the hem of my cloak as I turned away from him, but I did not want to hear any more claims on an old friendship that had never existed.

As I walked out, though, I called over my shoulder: "But don't worry. I won't tell old Black Feathers. I don't really care who made a fool of his great-nephew, or why. It probably served him right." ●

BLOG BYTES

by Bill Crider

Well, it's happened again. A blog I touted here has gone into hibernation. This time it's Steve Lewis's excellent resource, *Mystery*File* (**http://mysteryfile.com/blog**). The good news is that the archives are still available and that Steve will continue work on a couple of projects: Al Hubin's *Addenda* to his *Revised Crime Fiction IV* (**http://www.crimefictioniv.com**), a bibliographic necessity, and *Murder at 3 Cents a Day* (**http://www.lendinglibmystery.com**), a site to which Steve and Bill Pronzini will be adding even more cover images. If you haven't taken a look at the covers of all those great lending-library volumes, wait no longer.

The name of SJ Rozan should be familiar to readers of this magazine, since she's won just about every award for mystery writing that there is, including the Edgar for best novel. Her blog (**http://www.journalscape.com/sjrozan**) is a bit different, as it includes original poetry along with other observations, such as commentary on what it was like to teach a writing class in the Alaskan bush. You might also want to click on SJ's site called *Six Word Stories* (**http://www.journalscape.com/six-word**). (Continued on p. 131)

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Poor Old Frankie

by Barbara Nadel

Barbara Nadel is a celebrated author in her native Britain, having won the CWA's Silver Dagger in 2005 for *Deadly Web*, an entry in her contemporary police procedural series set in Turkey, starring Inspector Cetin Ikmen. Her latest Ikmen novel, *A Passion for Killing*, came out in the U.K. in 2007. "Poor Old Frankie" was inspired by Ms. Nadel's own experience: she once worked in a psychiatric hospital. †

Father forgive me for I have sinned . . .

For a time, Frankie made shifts at the Runfold Psychiatric Hospital worthwhile, and I let him down. When you work for a nursing agency you don't usually get close to the patients. But Frankie Driscoll was different. He was still in there. What do I mean by that exactly? I mean that he hadn't turned into a shuddering vegetable like so many of them do on the long-term chronic wards. Frankie Driscoll was a far greater person than just his diagnosis or even the medication that coshes most of his kind to the ground.

I met Frankie one morning in December 1994. Loping past the dead tangle of bushes that were allowed to straggle unkempt outside the chronic ward, the first words he ever said to me were, "Can I trust you, girl?"

Suspicious as ever with unknown patients about what might be about to follow, I nevertheless replied, "Yes."

"Come here." He beckoned me over with one thin, sharp-nailed finger. He was old, at least seventy I reckoned at the time, and his hair was as white as the sheets on the patients' beds should have been.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"What's yours?" he countered.

I watched him shift what remained of his roll-up from the left to the right-hand side of his toothless mouth. "You a nurse, a new nurse," he said. "I seen you."

"I'm with the agency," I said.

"I know that!" he responded as if to an idiot, "Why you think I want to talk to you?"

It isn't easy to do a good job as a temporary or agency nurse who works with people who are physically ill. You don't know the patients or the other staff and getting information out of stressed

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or overworked people isn't easy. In a psychiatric setting this is even, if anything, harder. Psychiatric patients need to be listened to, understood, and not just dismissed as "delusional." Not all of the tales that they tell exist only in their heads. Before I started working for the agency, I was on the permanent staff of the Wicklow Psychiatric Hospital twenty miles back towards London. I got to know patients on what had been my own chronic ward well. Only sometimes did my patients' stories live only in their minds.

"I'm Frankie," the old man in front of me said.

"Julia," I said.

He nodded. "Well, Julia," he said, "it's about what happens in the evenings. Them horrors on that ward, they trying to poison poor old Frankie."

Hand-over to the night staff was at five-thirty in the afternoon. It was now five, but because it was winter it was already dark. The six of us who had covered the day shift had to sit crammed into the tiny ward office which was lit, for some reason, by a light bulb that was struggling to push out forty watts of power. Pat, the ward manager, liked to have a chat with "her" staff before the ward was given over to the night nurses.

"Any other bits of business?" she said after the various medication and therapy regimes that patients were on had been discussed. "Problems?"

Pat McCauley wasn't the easiest woman to work for. Like me, she was in her mid forties with the full Monty of husband, kids, and mortgage back home. Unlike me, she was both enormously overweight and very, very sociable. Pat didn't "do" criticism and neither did her two deputies, Tracey and Janice. The three of them were a team. On my first day at Runfold, which had only been the previous week, I had witnessed—sort of—what had happened when the only other permanent member of staff, Geoff, had questioned something Pat had done. The three of them had taken him into the office, Pat had pulled the blinds down, and half an hour later Geoff had emerged quiet and seemingly thoughtful. It was at that point that I made a promise to myself not to tangle with Pat or any of her acolytes. After what had happened at the Wicklow I knew I didn't need it. Against all my natural instincts I swallowed back what Frankie had told me and said nothing. At the end of the meeting Pat and the other two waved the rest of us on our way home with cheery smiles.

"See you tomorrow," Pat said thickly as we left, "unless any of us wins the lottery!"

Sarah, the other agency nurse, muttered words to the effect that after a lottery win we couldn't expect to see her for dust. Pat shut the door behind us and I heard her, Tracey, and Janice sit back down again.

I was walking from the ward to the car park when Frankie

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loomed up at me again. "You never said nothing about me to that great fat dollop and her pals, did you?" he said as he nervously rolled his cigarette around the edges of his mouth.

"No." I sighed. The story Frankie had told me that morning, embellished with various paranoid details like the one about the KGB parachuting into the hospital grounds, had basically revolved around a belief he had that he was being injected with something—he didn't know what—against his will. This was happening just before hand-over every afternoon and Frankie named Pat McCauley as his assailant. Her acolytes apparently helped by holding Frankie down. Much as the three of them gave me the creeps, I couldn't believe that they would do such a thing.

"But why would Pat and the others want to do that?" I said. "You're no trouble, Frankie."

I'd read his file. Frankie was diabetic, but not badly so and was given his intravenous insulin, along with his psychiatric medication, every morning.

Frankie leaned in towards me, his rank cigarette-scented breath blasting into my face. "She want my money, that fat lazy dollop!" he said.

"Yes, but . . ."

"They keep giving me medicine, see," he said. "That make me not know what I'm doing. I could sign anything they want me to like that."

"Yes, but . . ."

"Then they'll kill me!" he gabbled. "I need help, girl! Don't know what I have done and what I 'ent! You're new here, you look as like you can be trusted. I hope to Christ that you can! Get a letter to my friend, will you, girly?"

Frankie, Francis Driscoll, had been, so his file had told me, a merchant seaman in his youth. He'd been very far from his native Cornwall, all over the world, in fact, before he'd started hearing voices in his early forties. Diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1969, he'd been at Runfold ever since. There was no mention in his file of any money or property. The only hint of anything vaguely connected to wealth was the name of his hometown, Padstow, the village now, over ten years later, made fashionable by the celebrity chef Rick Stein.

"Frankie, I don't know about all this," I said as I looked down at the car keys now in my hands.

"Think I'm just a raving nutter, do you?" Frankie said, his lank white hair shaking with anger. "Just like the rest of them! Thought you was different, I did! Thought I saw summat there in your eyes, some human feeling, so I did! You's with the agency!"

Quite what Frankie thought my being an agency nurse meant, I didn't know. But I suspected he imagined I was maybe, in reality, with a friendly security force of some sort. A lot of patient delusions revolve around war, politics, and espionage.

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However, real or not, Frankie was frightened of something and I knew from my own experiences of fear in the past just how awful that was. His eyes were full of tears, he was shaking, I felt for him. Whether or not I believed the stuff abut Pat McCauley and her friends at this point I do not know. I looked into Frankie's face and smiled. "Who's this friend of yours, then?"

"King Fahd of Saudi Arabia," Frankie replied.

Of course, anything is possible. Ordinary people do meet up with kings and celebrities and strike up friendships with them from time to time. Frankie had been all over the world, and so it was just possible he had met up with a Saudi prince at some point in his travels. King Fahd, my oldest who wants to study politics at college told me, was about Frankie's age. He had also, apparently, travelled a lot when he was young.

Because it was her ward, I had to tell Pat what I was doing. Frankie hadn't seen King Fahd, so he said, since they were both youngsters and so we'd agreed just to send a letter to say that Mr. Driscoll wasn't well. Pat said, "I don't see the harm. It's a load of eyewash of course, and you'll never hear back, but if it keeps Frankie happy . . ."

She smiled across at him. I took my pen and writing paper over to Frankie's bed and sat down beside him. "So Frankie," I said, "what . . ."

"Vicious bitch!" Frankie said. I saw that his eyes were still firmly fixed on Pat. "Rotten cow!"

"Frank . . ."

"Don't wanna write no letter today!" Frankie said. He looked down at me and I could see the heaviness of the drugs in his eyes. "Feel too rough. Big fat cow make me feel too rough."

"Yes, well, maybe another . . ."

I was interrupted by Frankie's noisy, unconscious breathing. I put my pad and pen back in my handbag.

The occupant of the bed next to Frankie's, an elderly man called Stephen, said, "Ashes. From the crematorium. Everywhere."

Tracey, who was as thin and wasted as her superior Pat was fat and blooming, came over and looked at Frankie with a smile on her face.

"He sleeping again?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said. "We were going to write a letter but . . ."

"Oh, bless!" Tracey said and then she walked back towards the ward office, went in, and pulled the door shut behind her.

We eventually got the letter written three days later. Frankie was, as had become usual for him that week, in his bed when he dictated it to me. But he was hopeful of an answer from his "old friend" whom he had addressed informally as "Fahd." I asked him where I should send the letter and he looked at me struck and said, "Well, to The Royal Palace, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, of course! And don't forget

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to put my address in there for him to answer. He'll come and get me, Fahd will, when he knows I'm in a place like this."

At the ward meeting before hand-over again that night, I told everyone what I'd done and yet again Tracey said, "Bless."

Because there was no way of knowing how much Frankie's letter would cost to send to Saudi Arabia, I would have to take it to the post office. This I had already decided to do the following day when I wasn't booked to work. Pat did offer to do this task for me, but I declined. I put the letter in the post to Saudi Arabia in the morning.

I didn't work on the chronic or any other ward over at Runfold for three weeks after that. First of all I was sick, then it was Christmas, for which I wanted to be at home, and then the following week they didn't need me. When I did go back, it was the New Year, 1995. Not that time appeared to have ticked over very much on the ward. Psychiatric wards are notoriously frozen in time; the chronic ward at Runfold being, seemingly, no exception. But then I had reckoned without Frankie.

Now, as he'd been before Christmas, bed-bound, he was nevertheless livelier than when I'd last seen him. "Did you send that letter off to my mate Fahd?" he said as soon as he saw me.

I said that I had.

Frankie smiled. "Good!" And then, first looking around the ward, he pointed towards the office and said, "I'll show this lot! That big dollop reckons she's going to get her fat hands on my little cottage—she's got another thing coming!"

His "little cottage"? What "little cottage" was this?

"On the front at Padstow," Frankie said in an impatient way as if I should somehow know this already. "Got it off Fahd, I did. Won him at a game of cards in Brindisi, I did. My old dad lived there years."

"Yes, but Frankie," I said, "if that's so, why are you here in this hospital in Essex?"

I wasn't telling him that what he was saying was wrong, but in line with the training I'd been given I wasn't colluding with his delusion either. He was in a hospital in Essex, he had been originally admitted from an address in Southend on Sea, Padstow didn't come into it, except as the place where he'd grown up. Not as far as I could see.

Frankie narrowed his eyes, leaned in towards me, and said, "I ain't lying, girl. You get ahold of a wheelchair, take me outside, and I'll tell you."

"Why are you always in bed these days, Frankie?" I asked him as I stood up and looked around for a wheelchair.

"Tell you that outside, too," he said darkly. "You got a fag, have you?"

"Just after the war, nineteen forty-eight, it were," Frankie said as he puffed heavily on one of the cigarettes from my secret and very guilty stash at the bottom of my handbag. "Me and all these Arabs played cards at this club in Brindisi. I didn't know that the bloke I

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just knew as Fahd was a prince until it was all over. Then, when he give me a great heap of money I won off him, he told me. See him again a few years later in Gibraltar, went out we did, just him and me. I told him I bought me dad a little place in Padstow with his money. Fahd, he laughed and he said that were a good thing to do and if I ever needed his help I was just to say so. He never thought he'd be king, you know. He's just like you and me, girl."

There was no way of knowing whether any of this was true or not. King Fahd had, apparently, in his youth, travelled widely and could well have spent some time in the sort of places merchant seamen might frequent. After all, even princes can be curious about the seamier side of the world's great ports. But the place in Padstow was something quite different. There was no mention of it anywhere in his notes. When Frankie was "committed," which is what happened to people back in the 'sixties when they became mentally unwell, he'd been staying at a bed-and-breakfast place in Southend. For all practical purposes, he was homeless. Unmarried, the name he gave as his next of kin was indeed his father, even though he had apparently died back in the late 1950s. Nowhere was there any mention of a house, money, or anything of any value whatsoever.

"So why have you been in that bed since well before Christmas, Frankie?" I asked as I took a cigarette out for myself and then, very shamefacedly, lit up.

He first looked towards the windows of the ward behind the bushes and then, turning back to me, he said, "Big fat dollop and her mates keep on giving me them injections. Tell me it's the diabetes, but it ain't. Takes my legs away, them injections do. I think what they give me is getting stronger, girl. If Fahd don't get back to us soon, you'll have to tell your agency."

I thought about telling him that "my agency" wasn't in any way what I imagined he thought it was, but then I didn't. It would only agitate and confuse him. Later, when I took Frankie back to the ward, Janice asked me what I'd been doing and why. I told her that Frankie had asked to be taken out to get some fresh air.

"Well, that's good of you to do that, Julia," Janice said. "But you should really tell Pat first if you're going to take a patient off the ward. I mean, Frankie does have physical problems, too, doesn't he?"

"Yes. Oh. Sorry."

"That's okay," Janice said brightly.

But over at the other side of the ward, Pat looked on with a very straight face. Halfway through the afternoon she came over to me, when I was scrubbing off some dropped food from a patient's cardigan at the sink.

"Nice the way that old Frankie has taken to you, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes," I replied as I scrubbed away at what really was a very sad old lady's cardigan.

"I like the way you handled that thing with the king of Saudi

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Arabia," Pat said. "That was good."

"Thank you." I felt there was a "but" heading my way somewhere along the line and so I looked down at the poor old cardigan probably with more obvious concentration than I would do normally.

" 'Course, I know that you wasn't in any way colluding with his delusion," Pat said. "But do be careful, won't you, Julia?"

I looked up, feeling the blood flush hot into my face as I did so.

"*I* know what happened over at the Wicklow wasn't your fault," she said. "You weren't well at the time." She smiled. "I mean, just because we work in this business, don't mean we can't have our own little breakdowns from time to time, does it? But . . ."

"But what?" I said as all the hair on the back of my neck stood up at once.

"But just be careful," Pat said. "About what you do for the patients. They are unwell and . . . well, Julia, we don't want an 'incident' here at Runfold, do we?"

She then continued to smile into my face for another few seconds before she moved off back towards her office once again. Shaken, I sat down in a chair next to the sink and began to sweat. I hadn't been dismissed, exactly, from the Wicklow hospital when I'd had my breakdown, but they had "let me go," with references, very easily. And Pat McCauley knew.

My marriage was going through a bad patch at the time and my father had died, in considerable pain and with very little dignity, at the local general hospital. One of my patients, Michelle, told me that her cousin, a famous and very popular Hollywood movie star, was coming to visit for her birthday. Against the advice of every one of my nurses, I decorated the ward with banners saying "Welcome George" while Michelle, now convinced that I was a demon hell-bent upon kidnapping her cousin, shivered in a corner. There was, of course, no movie star. Michelle's only claim to fame was a distant relationship to a local drug dealer. I went off shift that night, cried for two days solid, and then spent a year on antidepressants. The Wicklow and what had happened there was the reason I was only doing agency work. Not that my casual status, quite obviously, had allowed me to completely escape my past. Pat McCauley and, no doubt, her cronies knew about it, too. I had been, I realised then, very stupid to get involved with Frankie Driscoll and his king of Saudi Arabia. And yet, Michelle and her delusions notwithstanding, I had and have always believed that to dismiss what appears to be a patient's delusions out of hand is wrong. After all, who am I, or anyone else for that matter, to dictate what is and is not real? Just because a person is "insane" doesn't mean that he or she is also telling falsehoods. Conversely, the "sane" are not necessarily always truthful. But then, if Pat McCauley was warning me off Frankie Driscoll, why was she doing so? There was nothing in the old man's file about any property in Cornwall. His father had lived on the waterfront at

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Padstow in the '50s, it was true. That was the address Frankie'd given for his next of kin. But when he'd died the house he had lived in effectively disappeared. Like a lot of poor people, Frankie's dad had probably rented the place. There was not, or didn't seem to be, any money and besides, Frankie openly hated his ward manager. If Pat was warning me off, was she, in fact, doing it for my own good? In other words, to help my career to get back on its feet once again?

I thought about this for the few days I spent away from the ward. Frankie, like a lot of long-term patients, had an appointed solicitor, Ray Jenkins, who represented the affairs of several people on the ward. But I knew that even if Mr. Jenkins did know about some cottage in Padstow he wasn't going to tell me anything about it. Client confidentiality and all that. Maybe Pat McCauley, much as she and her acolytes gave me the creeps, did actually like me?

I went back onto the ward on the following Sunday and was shocked to see how far Frankie had deteriorated. Totally bed-bound now, he was drifting out of consciousness every few minutes. Pat, who was not usually on shift at the weekends, told me, "Doctor says it's the diabetes out of control." She looked down at Frankie with sympathetic eyes. "Poor love."

I sat with him. He opened his eyes a few times, and once, just after the doctor came to do his observations, he looked at me and said, "He's part of it, old fraud!" But then he lapsed into unconsciousness again. A couple of the other patients had gone home to their relatives for the weekend and so the ward was quiet. Most of the time I was around or near to Frankie's bed. But then, so was Pat, and Tracey too, and when I left at five they stayed on, with the doctor. The three of them together did make me feel uneasy, but beyond my memories of Frankie's ramblings there was no real reason why that should have been so. They weren't doing or saying anything odd or worrying.

The following morning I was booked to return to the Runfold chronic ward again and so I duly turned up at eight for the beginning of my shift. When I first walked onto the ward I was shocked that I couldn't see Frankie anywhere.

"Pat had him moved to a side ward," Tracey told me when I asked after the old man. "Took a turn for the worse late last night."

"Pat was with him? Late?"

Tracey looked into my eyes very steadily. "She cares, Julia," she said. "Pat is a very dedicated nurse. Nothing's too much trouble."

I tried to get into the side room where Frankie was lying, but it was too full of Pat, the doctor, and their very obvious, cooing concern. I got to the office just as the postman arrived. Sorting the post on a ward every morning is a very lowly job, it's the kind of thing that agency staff do to take a little bit of the pressure off the permanent nurses. And so I shuffled through the letters and postcards for the patients, through the brown official envelopes addressed,

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largely, to Pat, until I came to a very high-quality envelope with a pretty, foreign stamp. It was from Saudi Arabia and it was addressed to Mr. Francis Driscoll. Without even thinking, I put it straight into the pocket of my trousers.

They just wouldn't damn well go! Every ten minutes I looked into Frankie's room and not once was it empty. If it wasn't the doctor in there, it was the doctor and Pat; if it wasn't the doctor and Pat, it was Pat and Tracey, or Tracey and Janice, or sometimes the whole lot of them together.

Geoff, who was the only other permanent member of staff on shift, said, "Seems like Frank's dying, doesn't it?"

"Does it?" I said. "Why, has Pat said or . . ."

Geoff looked around at the ward with eyes like a frightened rabbit. He then took me to one side and said, "I was on shift last night. I know I shouldn't do double shifts but we were short and . . . Some bloke turned up about nine."

"At night?"

"Yeah. No one said who he was, but then I heard that doctor, Cooper, he said that the bloke was Frank's solicitor. Well, it happens, doesn't it," Geoff said, "When they get near to death. Some of them ask for their solicitor. Even mad people want to make sure everything's in order when they pass on, don't they?"

"Yes . . ."

"But I think we're supposed to keep it from the other patients," Geoff said. "Don't want to upset them, do we?"

I felt my stomach turn over and so I went to the toilet. Another legacy from my crisis at the Wicklow is irritable bowel syndrome which, in my case, manifests as painful abdominal cramps. I have it to this day.

I said to Geoff, "I'm just going to the loo." And then I rushed off.

I sat down on the lid of the toilet seat, put my hand in my pocket, and took out the letter from Saudi Arabia. It was a very nice letter, very concerned. The person who signed his name just "Fahd" was very sorry that his old friend Frank was so ill and would do anything necessary to alleviate his suffering. Money was, he said, no object, and he would make sure that the best doctors in his kingdom were made available to his old friend. The letter finished, "I suppose this means that you haven't been down to your house in Padstow of late. Such a shame. It is so very beautiful."

Every part of my body shook. I must have looked down at that letter at least five times to check that I wasn't hallucinating. But every time I looked at it, the import of what it said hit me even harder. Someone had to know about this! But who? Pat, her cronies, the doctor, even apparently Frankie's solicitor obviously all knew each other and, if Frank was right, Pat at least had her eye on his little cottage in Padstow. The cottage I now *knew* existed. King Fahd of Saudi

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Arabia had confirmed it to me, King Fahd who was Frankie's friend!

At the very least Frankie himself had to know about this. Even if he was in a coma I could read what the king had written and maybe that would bring him comfort. I should have put the letter straight back into my pocket when I came out of the cubicle, but I didn't and so it was in my hand when Pat and Tracey came towards me.

"What have you got there?" Pat asked as she put a tubby hand out towards me. "Geoff said that the post came ages ago. Is that something for me?"

"No," I said. "It's . . ." I dried up completely, just stood there looking at her dumbly.

"Well, it can't be for you, can it?" Tracey said. "You're agency."

Geoff had to have seen me do the post. Cowed to Pat's will, he obviously tittle-tattled for whatever praise she might be giving out. Stupid, poor, weak Geoff!

"Who's the letter for, Julia?" Pat asked.

I looked down at it and noticed that my hands were now sweating. "It's for Frankie," I said. "It's from his friend."

"What, the king of Saudi Arabia?" Pat laughed and, as she did so, I watched the normally fat and jolly mask slip. This was a face that could have curdled milk. "Give it to me."

"No," I said. "It's for Frankie."

Pat, thunderous, clicked her fingers. "Give!"

"No," I repeated. "It's for him and anyway, Pat, if you don't believe that Frankie knows King Fahd, what is the problem? What's the problem anyway? What are you afraid might be in a letter from King Fahd to Frankie Driscoll?"

Pat's small blue eyes almost disappeared into the depths of her face. Encouraged by her obvious discomfort, I pushed it even further, too far. "I know about the cottage in Padstow," I said. "Is that why Frankie's solicitor was here last night, with you? You know, if Geoff is going to be your snitch you should really train him in the art of what not to gossip about, too."

For a very brief moment, I thought that I'd won. Stupid. Hospitals are tailor-made for bullies—the tiny staff toilets were miles away from anywhere and besides, the TV in the day room was, as usual, blaring out at the heavily sedated patients who stared open-mouthed at it. It was Tracey, right behind her boss, who punched me, but it was Pat who sat on my chest while I desperately tried to cling to a letter from a king.

"Give it to me, you bitch!" Pat cried as she clawed at my hand with her French-polished fingernails.

"What are you doing, Pat?" I yelled. "Upping Frankie's insulin dose until it kills him?"

Diabetics can have too much insulin. That is a fact. Pat's face, briefly, became very white.

"The doctor and the solicitor are in on it too, aren't they?" I said,

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attempting to capitalise on her obvious fear.

But then she smiled. "Prove it," she said and then she hit me and I lost consciousness.

I don't actually remember Pat taking the letter from King Fahd out of my hand, but I never saw it again. That day, the day of Frankie's death, and many more after it, became just blurs of faces, voices, and vague impressions. I stated many times that I wanted to contact the king, if for no other reason than to inform him about Frankie's death. But I was never allowed to do so by either my doctors or my nurses and later on that year the monarch, sadly, suffered a stroke.

I was detained formally under the Mental Health Act for twenty-eight days. Once in treatment for my "violent and disordered behaviour," I opted to stay for another month, for the sake of my family. They were really worried about me. I would keep on about Frankie, who was a patient who had loved his hospital and had willingly given all his worldly goods to it. The only "conspiracy" that existed, my doctor said, was the one that the unbalanced chemicals in my head had created. They had produced King Fahd just as surely as they had produced the fact that Frankie had been murdered. I carried on with my story for a while, but when I realised that to continue would do me personally no good, I gave up. People do.

Some time in 1995, I don't remember exactly when, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and I haven't worked as a nurse or anything else since. Pat and her cronies are long gone now and quite what the hospital did with the windfall they received from poor old Frankie, I don't know. Sometimes I fantasise about going down to Padstow and seeing who might be about. Pat, Tracey, Janice, the doctor, the solicitor.

But I never do. After all, even if they were all there, what would that prove? Even with medication, I am not "sane," whatever that is, and so who would even bother to listen to me? Not that I'm making excuses. I let Frankie down and in doing so I perpetrated a great sin. Father Dale forgives me every time I bring the subject up in confession, which is weekly now. But God is another matter. He doesn't forgive me because the bullies won, because He knows, just as well as I do, that Pat's challenge for me to "Prove it!" was an admission of her absolute guilt. Not that any of that really matters anymore. That Frankie died without ever knowing that his friend Fahd cared about him is what makes me really bitter. That the hospital took his house is one thing, but to take, or rather conceal, a genuine expression of human warmth is quite another. That is evil, that is twisted, and one day, maybe not soon, but sometime, I will go down to Padstow, I will find Pat, Tracey, Janice, the solicitor, and the doctor and . . .

And perhaps I will do to them what they did to poor old Frankie. After all, mad or not, I am still a nurse, I still know how to hold a syringe. . . . ●

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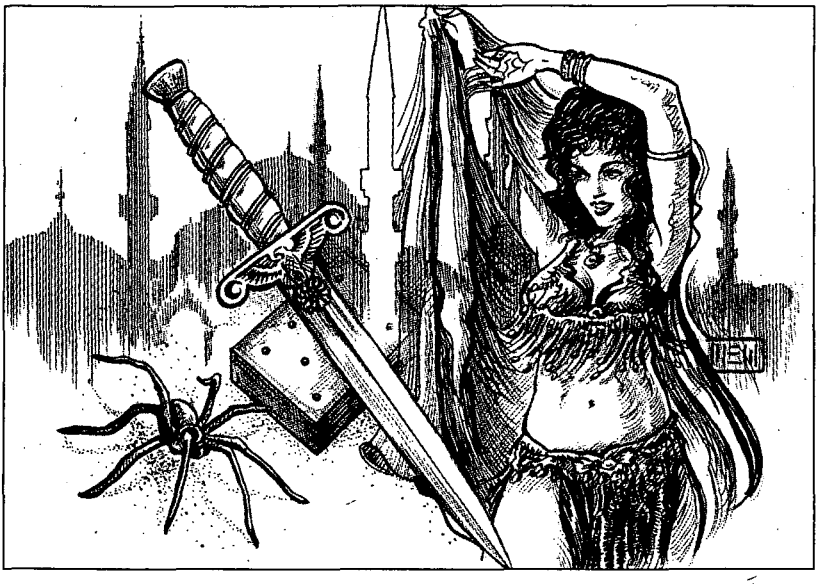

Art by Mark Evan Walker

Turkish Delight

by Edward D. Hoch

"Turkish bath," Walt Stanton announced as their plane circled for a landing at Istanbul's airport.

"Turkish towels!" Juliet Ives countered in their attempt to name all things Turkish.

"Turkish rugs."

"Turkish Delight!"

"Wait a minute," Stanton protested. "Is that something sexual?"

"Of course not, stupid! They're flavored candy cubes dusted with sugar."

"Sort of like Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*?"

"Nothing like that. Brighton Rock is a stick of hard candy."

"Well, they're both candies," Stanton insisted as the plane landed none too gently on the tarmac.

They were seated near the front of the flight from London's Heathrow, where they'd had to change planes. As they left the plane and made their way up the Jetway, he tried again. "Turkey trot."

"It has to be *Turkish,* Stanton. That's an American dance, named after the bird."

"But the bird was named after the country, wasn't it?"

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"Only through some confusion. It's a long story."

"You can tell me on the way home," he decided. "Let's check in at our hotel and go see the client."

They'd booked a room at the Pierre Loti, a modern luxury hotel whose only drawback was its location in a rather noisy part of the city. But they'd just be there two nights and it seemed they deserved a bit of luxury after their recent journey to rural China.

Stanton & Ives was a worldwide courier service for companies and individuals who needed instant, guaranteed delivery or pickup anywhere on earth. They'd started the company after graduating from Princeton together, and thus far the business had been mildly profitable. They maintained a small office across from the Strand Bookstore on lower Broadway, and employed a secretary to handle business when they were away on assignments, usually together.

Unlike other stories in Edward D. Hoch's Stanton and Ives series, which are all narrated by Stanton, this one is told in the third person. This, the author explains, is because the duo get separated in the course of the story and he wanted to cover both viewpoints. We recently asked readers to write and name their favorite Hoch series and Stanton and Ives, along with Nick Velvet and Dr. Sam Hawthorne, were often mentioned. †

When she saw the massive bed in their hotel room, Ives suggested they spend both days in bed and forget about the assignment, but Stanton was more practical. Admiring her long legs as she stretched out on the counterpane, he reminded her they'd be meeting with the client first thing in the morning.

The assignment this time was to pick up a prime example of Ottoman calligraphy and transport it to Berlin, where a wealthy German collector had recently purchased it for just under one million dollars. "Calligraphy?" Ives had questioned at the time. "You mean like handwriting?"

"I suspect it's more than handwriting," Stanton told her. "We'll see."

As they left the hotel in the morning they were accosted by a street vendor selling bread rings. His grizzled face showed the nicks and scars of a hard life, but not a shy one. "Whatever you need," he told them in accented English. "Bread rings, fresh fish, spices, and more. I can supply hashish, opium balls—"

"Not interested," Stanton told him as they tried to move past.

"Perhaps a woman to keep you two company."

"No," Ives told him emphatically.

"Do you need a gun, a dagger? My name is Ersu and you can usually find me on this corner, from morning till midnight."

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"I'll remember that," Stanton said as they moved on.

"Persistent, isn't he?" Ives muttered as they hurried on their way.

The seller of the calligraphy was an art dealer named Bruno Tranle. He had a gallery not far from the famed Topkapi Museum, and was an astute gentleman in his sixties who showed them into his private office. His English was perfect and he explained he'd been educated at Cambridge. "Let me get you some tea," he offered.

Ives demurred, noting the early hour, but Tranle scoffed. "Nonsense! Tea from the Black Sea region is our national drink, served at any hour of the day. Tea-makers even do the rounds of offices in many buildings here."

"Oh, very well," she relented, knowing it always pleased Stanton when she was cordial to clients. "I thought people drank Turkish coffee here."

Tranle shook his head. "Too expensive for most tastes."

He made the tea with great care and served it with pride, entertaining them with little stories about life in Istanbul. After about twenty minutes he decided to get down to business. He walked to a large safe and twirled the combination dial with the confidence of familiarity, carefully removing a slender canvas tube and unrolling its contents. "This is the item to be transported by courier to Germany."

Stanton and Ives gazed at the painting, a wall hanging some two feet wide and four feet long on which the graceful Arabic calligraphy had taken on the shape of a person. The body, legs, and arms were a swirl of green, while the face was done in red with a white cap on top. "It's beautiful," Ives whispered in awe. "Are these Arabic words?"

"They are indeed. It is a verse from the sacred Koran, rendered in the shape of a man. The verse is painted on calfskin and may date from the sixteenth century. It could even be the work of Sheik Hamdullah, the founder of Ottoman calligraphy, but we cannot be certain."

"You sold this to a German collector?"

"A businessman, really. Turks are admitted to Germany as guest workers and often decide to remain there. This man, Rudolph Meinz, is purchasing it for display in the reception area of his plant, which employs many Turks. It is a goodwill gesture, and an expensive one."

"Surely you could hire a courier in this country to transport it to Germany," Stanton said.

Bruno Tranle sighed and poured them some more tea. "The situation in the Middle East is well known. There are terrorists everywhere, including Istanbul. As you may know, Turkey is mainly made up of Sunni Muslims, with about twenty percent Kurdish in the eastern part of the country. But hiring a courier or a package-delivery company in Turkey is gambling that they side with your

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beliefs and not with another faction. The Kurds are in open revolt against our government, and terrorists could purchase a great many weapons with the money from this sale. I've heard good things about Stanton and Ives, and decided you were my best option."

"You won't be sorry," Ives promised him. "And we're fully bonded, of course. We have seats on an early flight to Berlin tomorrow morning."

"As soon as we make delivery we'll call you," Stanton assured him.

"All right. Here's half your fee now, as agreed. The remainder will be wire-transferred to your bank account after a successful delivery to Rudolph Meinz." He stood up to shake hands with them. "You'll be spending the night in Istanbul?"

Stanton nodded. "The morning flight is best for us."

"You should see some of our night life. I can especially recommend Turkish Delight."

"A candy shop?" Ives asked.

"No," Tranle replied with a smile. "She's a belly dancer at the Bosphorus Cafe, the best in the city at this moment."

"Oh," Ives replied, glancing at Stanton.

They secured the tube with its calligraphic painting in the hotel's safe since it was too large for the mini-safe in their room. Then Stanton and Ives spent the afternoon touring the Grand Bazaar, a network of covered arcades containing more than seventeen hundred businesses. Here they found jewelers, shoemakers, tailors, and furniture and rug merchants, along with a variety of eating places. The maze-like marketplace soon sorted itself into some sort of order. Not wanting to buy anything so large it would have to be shipped home, they confined themselves mainly to the jewelry shops and a book market that featured vast quantities of second-hand volumes in virtually every language.

"You'd need a day or two for this place alone," Ives marveled.

"I wish we could get to Topkapi," Stanton said, "but I guess there's no time before dinner."

Ives gave him one of her famous looks. "You don't want to miss your belly dancer."

"How can I resist her with a name like Turkish Delight?"

They found the Bosphorus Cafe without difficulty, taking a yellow taxi that reminded them of New York cabs. The cafe occupied the first floor of an ornate three-story building that may have been a bank in some prior life. There were Gypsy beggars in the street outside, and young men passed by carrying boxes and crates on their backs. The food was passable, and at the end of the meal everyone was served a single piece of unwrapped lokum, the local name for Turkish Delight. A note on the menu explained that lokum became popular in Turkey during the nineteenth century, only becoming known as Turkish Delight after the name was changed by a British

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company. The confection was said to have been a favorite of Napoleon, Picasso, and Winston Churchill, among many others.

"We're in good company," Ives remarked.

Then the lights dimmed and an announcer introduced, in Turkish and English, "The toast of Istanbul, the fabulous Turkish Delight!"

Stanton had never found belly dancers particularly erotic, but he had to admit that Miss Delight was quite good at what she did, appearing in a striking red costume and veils that, naturally, left her midsection exposed. She danced to the beat of the music, moving her body in rolling waves that seemed endless as the tide. "She's really something," he told Ives.

"I can see you're impressed."

As she danced close to the ringside tables several men reached out with currency to tuck into her skimpy sequined costume. Up close she appeared older than at a distance, perhaps nearing forty, with hair black as midnight and makeup a bit too thick to be convincing. "She has a few tricks," he admitted.

"Let's go back to the hotel. I can show you more tricks than that."

He downed the rest of his drink. "Sounds good to me."

"Let me stop at the ladies' room first."

Turkish Delight was just finishing her dance, bowing low to the audience, when Ives left her seat and scampered toward a lighted doorway across the room. Stanton signaled their waiter for the check and put it on his business credit card.

The waiter was back in a few minutes for his signature. He slipped the credit card into his card case and listened to a singer give a passable rendering of a French song popular some decades earlier. He looked around for Ives, but couldn't see her anywhere. Turkish Delight was nowhere in sight either. He'd expected her to be lingering at the bar as they sometimes did in New York clubs.

After waiting some fifteen minutes, he called a waitress over. "My—my wife has been in the ladies' room a long time. I wonder if you could check on her, see if she's ill. Her name is Juliet."

Happily, the waitress understood English and went off to see about Ives. She returned after a few moments looking blank. "She's not there. The place is empty right now."

"Strange. Is there a back way out of here?"

"Just through the kitchen."

Stanton left the table and wandered up to the bar. "I came in with a young woman, tall, long legs, long blond hair, full lips, a cute nose—" He stopped, realizing the bartender didn't understand a word he was saying.

He looked around in frustration, seeking out the waitress who understood English. She was nowhere to be seen, but a small boy was approaching his spot at the bar. He was one of the beggars they'd seen outside. The boy muttered something he couldn't understand and forced a folded note into Stanton's hand. Then he

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was gone.

Stanton unfolded the note and read the words he was dreading: *Get the calligraphy from the hotel safe and await our call. Otherwise she dies.*

Ives awakened as if from a dream. Her head seemed about to burst, but when she tried to soothe it with her hand she realized she could not move her arms.

She opened her eyes and imagined she was in hell. The walls of the room were red and she rested on a red velvet sofa. A single floor lamp lit the room. "What happened?" she asked out loud, but there was no one there to answer her.

Presently, perhaps a quarter-hour later, a Turkish man entered the room. He was a handsome fellow with a dark moustache and deep dark eyes. She guessed his age to be around forty. "I see you are awake," he said in passable English.

"What happened to me? Where am I? My head hurts."

"We are sorry such tactics were necessary. You were struck from behind with a cosh, then injected with something to make you sleep. They removed you from the Bosphorus Cafe by way of the kitchen."

Ives realized for the first time that she could not move because her hands and feet were bound to the sofa. "Why have I been taken here?" she asked. "Where is my partner?"

"He is well, and has been informed of your situation. As soon as he turns over the painting you will be released."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"You need not know that. It is better you don't, if you expect to leave here alive." He poured a glass of water from a pitcher and allowed her to drink, lifting her head with a helpful hand to the back of her neck.

"Thank you," she acknowledged. Then, "Is Stanton doing what you asked?"

"We will know soon. You must rest now."

"What time is it?"

"After eleven." He cut a piece of duct tape from a roll on the floor. "I'm going to have to gag you."

She started to object, but the tape was already over her mouth. He left her alone and closed the door behind him. Glancing around as best she could, she saw no windows, but the red drapes on one wall could easily hide such an exit. There was another red sofa across the room, but there was no sign of her purse there or on the floor. She thought about her cell phone but decided there was little chance she could find it, much less use it to call Stanton. And what would she tell him, anyway? She had no idea where she was, though the place could well have been a room in a harem for all she knew.

She knew Stanton would find her somehow, even if he had to give up the painting. He would do that for her.

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Wouldn't he?

Stanton's first move was to ask for the owner of the Bosphorus Cafe. He was taken to a second-floor office where a bald man wearing thick horn-rimmed glasses sat at a computer screen. A tray of candy cubes sat on his nearby desk, each encased in a bit of rice paper. He looked up as Stanton entered. "I'm the building manager, Guzine Guler. What is your problem?"

"I wanted the owner."

"The owner is not on the premises."

"Very well. My name is Walt Stanton. I arrived here nearly three hours ago with a young American woman, my companion. We had dinner and watched the show. As we were about to leave, she went off to the ladies' room and never returned. I believe she has been kidnapped and is being held for ransom. Unless you want me to call the police, you'd better see that she's freed right away."

The bald man held out his empty palms to Stanton. "I know nothing of this. I can assure you no one here had anything to do with this supposed kidnapping."

"It's a real kidnapping. I'm not imagining it." He was tempted to show the note he'd received, but it might have led to questions he wasn't prepared to answer.

"I would suggest returning to your hotel, Mr. Stanton. Certainly your companion will return, if she isn't there already. It is not uncommon for young foreign ladies to meet a handsome Turk at the bar and go off with him for a brief dalliance. But they always come back."

Stanton's growing panic was fast turning into anger and he knew he had to control himself for Ives's sake. "I'll take your advice for now," he managed to reply.

He started to rise and Guler slid the tray of candies forward. "Here, take a Turkish Delight before you go."

Stanton left the office and went back downstairs, forcing himself to gaze at the faces along the bar. Ives was not among them, of course. He took a chance and had a taxi deliver him to the art gallery where they'd met with Bruno Tranle earlier in the day. The door was locked but he could see a light in the back office. He rang a bell by the door and waited. When nothing happened he rang again. This time Tranle poked his head out of the office and recognized Stanton.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as he opened the door.

"There's been a slight problem. We took your advice and ate at the Bosphorus. Somebody grabbed Ives when she went to the restroom. Now they want your calligraphy before they release her."

The color seemed to drain from Tranle's face. "I should never have suggested that place. Go back to your hotel and let me handle it."

"I—"

"Go quickly. I will contact you."

Stanton could see that his news had devastated the man. "Is

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there anything I can do?"

"Just wait for my call."

A taxi returned him to the hotel and Stanton made a point of going to the front desk and requesting the parcel he'd left in the safe. There were only a few people in the lobby, but he felt sure one of them was watching his every move. He took the canvas bag from the desk clerk and went up to his room with it.

The place seemed bare without Ives and he had difficulty remembering the last time they'd been apart. Opening the tube, he verified that the ancient Ottoman calligraphy was still intact. That was when the phone rang. They weren't wasting any time. He picked it up.

"Hello?"

"You did very well, Mr. Stanton," a husky male voice told him.

"Let me speak with Ives."

"That is impossible at the moment. She is being held elsewhere."

"You don't get the calligraphy until I know she's all right."

Silence. Then, "I will phone you back in thirty minutes' time. Be ready to make delivery."

After several minutes of slow and tedious work, Ives had managed to get her left hand free of the knotted cord that held it. Quickly she released her right hand and pulled the tape from her mouth. Then she freed her ankles and got unsteadily to her feet. The redness of the room seemed to engulf her and she made for the door as quickly as possible. Surprisingly, it was unlocked. She held her breath, expecting the Turkish man to come through at any instant, perhaps with gun in hand. When nothing happened she turned the knob slowly, then gradually inched the door open, revealing another red room, a parlor of sorts.

A man was sprawled on the floor. She knelt and turned him over, but it was no one she knew. There was blood on the back of his shirt, and a bloody dagger lay on the red carpet a few feet away, near a canvas bag somewhat similar to the one containing the calligraphy. Ives thought the dagger appeared to be a war souvenir, with a Nazi eagle on the hilt and a German inscription along the blade. She had no doubt the man was dead.

This room had a visible window and she went to it at once. It was dark out and she could see very little. She appeared to be on the third floor of a building, and there was no fire escape visible. She turned to look again at the body. Dead people didn't frighten her anymore, and she went quickly through his pockets. Wallet, handkerchief, keys, and a wrapped cube of Turkish Delight. Next she opened the canvas bag, revealing a large flat box and a tube of gold dust. She couldn't imagine what it was for.

The box, larger than a cigar box, intrigued her and she picked it up. For some reason the killer hadn't taken it, so apparently robbery wasn't the motive. She started to open it, then noticed a line

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of holes little larger than pinholes.

Could they be air holes?

She unlatched the lid of the box, opened it, and sprang back. The box was filled with spiders, perhaps two dozen of them, larger than the usual garden variety. They seemed a bit drowsy, but as one of them attempted to exit the box she quickly closed and latched the lid.

Had they brought in the spiders to torture or kill her? She needed to get out of here right away, before the Turk came back and found the body. The apartment door opened onto a corridor with a stairway at one end. She closed the door behind her and moved toward the staircase, drawn by the distant sound of Turkish music. Suddenly a figure all in red appeared at the top of the stairs and in that instant she realized where she was. It was Turkish Delight in her belly-dancing costume.

"What are you doing out here?" the dancer asked.

"I think I've just escaped from your apartment," Ives told her. "I like those red walls. They match your costume."

The belly dancer grunted and leapt at Ives with outstretched fingers, as if to scratch out her eyes. Ives ducked aside but Delight's hip caught her off balance and knocked her to the floor.

Thirty minutes passed and Stanton had heard nothing. He'd left the room briefly but now he was back by the phone, tense with fear, his gaze frequently returning to the slender canvas tube at his feet. Then, some fifteen minutes late, the telephone rang. His throat was dry when he picked it up and said, "Yes?"

"Bring the painting to the courtyard in front of the Blue Mosque," the same familiar voice demanded. "Your friend will be released then."

"Not unless I have proof that she's alive. Put her on the phone."

There was a moment's pause and then a whispered female voice said, "Walt? It's Juliet. I'm in big trouble. You gotta bring the painting or they'll kill me."

"I'll be there," he promised and hung up. Of course the whispered voice wasn't Ives. They never called each other by their first names. His only question now was whether she was still alive.

It was well after midnight when he took a cab to the courtyard of the Blue Mosque, clutching the canvas bag under one arm. The streets in this part of the city were all but deserted now, and only a few lonely beggars loitered on the corners. Stanton paid off the driver and walked toward the mosque with its six distinctive minarets outlined against the night sky. The courtyard was surrounded by a wall, but there were large gateways on each of its three sides. He chose the nearest one and walked through it, hoping he'd arrived before the others.

He hadn't.

Two men with handguns had been waiting near the sadirvan, a

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handsome octagonal building at the center of the courtyard. Stanton knew it contained an ablution fountain, one of many in the city, but right now he was more interested in the thugs with guns.

"Give us the tube," the closest one demanded.

"Not until I see Juliet Ives."

From across the courtyard came a woman's voice, cut off in midscream. Stanton could see her, a long veil obscuring her face and body. A tall man held her tightly by the arm. "Take it from him," he ordered the gunmen.

"Hold on," Stanton told them, unzipping the canvas tube and reaching inside. "I'll give it to you."

The blast from his sawed-off shotgun caught both men, knocking them over like tenpins. Then he was running across the courtyard toward the veiled woman and her captor.

"Stop!" the man shouted, trying to use the woman as a shield.

"I've got another barrel here. You'll get the same as your goons."

"You wouldn't shoot Miss Juliet."

"That's not her." As if to verify his statement, he reached out and grabbed a corner of the veil, ripping it away.

He was right. It wasn't Ives. It was Turkish Delight.

When she went down on the carpet of the upstairs hallway, Ives managed to kick out at Delight's ankle, bringing her down too. She wasn't up to wrestling the woman, but she was nearly twenty years younger and was on her feet before Delight recovered herself. "Don't try anything," Ives warned, showing her fist, "or you'll be dancing your next set with a very bloody nose."

"What do you want?" Delight asked, not looking for a fight.

"What do *I* want? I was in the ladies' room, minding my own business, and I wake up tied to a sofa in your apartment, with a dead man in the next room!"

"Dead man? Who is dead?" The words brought fear to Delight's face.

"You tell me," Ives replied. "Go look, but be careful of the spiders."

That seemed to trigger something in Delight. "Prattos! What did that fool do?" She hurried to unlock the apartment door, then gasped when she saw the body and the bloody dagger.

"Who was he?" Ives asked.

"He was a merchant. He was delivering spiders and gold dust."

"Did he have a key to this apartment?"

"No, of course not. He was bringing these things for my wedding."

"Wedding?"

Delight smiled. "I'm to be married day after tomorrow, to Wesley Fazzis." For a moment they were no longer enemies, just women talking.

"But why did you kidnap me?"

"To retrieve the calligraphy Bruno was selling to that German. It belongs to me. I want it at my wedding."

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"If it's yours, what was Bruno Tranle doing with it?"

Delight took a deep breath. "Bruno is my father."

"Your father!"

"He just phoned me and warned me not to injure you. We had no intention of doing harm."

The man who'd been with Ives when she recovered consciousness appeared at the top of the stairs. "What's happening here?" he asked, seeing them in the apartment doorway.

Delight smiled. "This is Wesley, my husband-to-be."

Ives grimaced. "We've met. I was tied to a sofa at the time."

"I am sorry about that," he told her. "I tried not to make the ropes too tight, but perhaps that is how you got free."

"It helped," she admitted. "Now where is Stanton?"

"Your partner? He has the calligraphy. We are meeting him in the courtyard of the Blue Mosque."

"If you harm me, he will kill you both," Ives told them, somehow doubting it was true.

"I will bring two of the Gypsies with weapons. He will surrender the calligraphy without a struggle. But you'd better come along too, just in case."

"You'll stay in the car," Delight told her. "I'll be you until we get the calligraphy."

"How do you intend to do that?"

"These veils can hide a great deal."

When the veil fell away, revealing Delight's frosty face, Stanton cried out in frustration. *"Ives!"* he shouted.

Surprisingly, a reply came back through the darkness. "Over here, Stanton!"

He saw the black sedan parked on the street and ran toward it. Ives was already out the rear door, hampered only by a handcuff holding her wrist to the car's interior. "Thank God you're safe!"

"Did I see you just blow those two Gypsies away?"

"A sawed-off shotgun full of birdshot. I bought it from that street vendor, Ersu. It put them out of action but they shouldn't have any lasting injuries."

Ives told him about finding the murdered man and the spiders. Delight had followed him to the car while Wesley dealt with the wounded Gypsies. "I must have that calligraphy for my wedding," she insisted.

"Are the spiders for your wedding, too?" Stanton asked.

"Of course! It is an American custom, no?"

"I don't think so. What about the man who brought them? Who killed him?"

"Prattos? I have no idea. I don't even know how he gained entry to my apartment. Wesley locked the door when he left your friend here."

Ives interrupted then, telling Stanton, "Tranle, the man who's

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paying us, is her father."

Stanton sighed and shook his head. "Unlock her handcuffs, Delight. It's time we all sat down and figured this out."

They returned to the Bosphorus Cafe and her upstairs apartment. Wesley Fazzis joined them soon thereafter. "Did you have to shoot them?" he grumbled to Stanton.

"They had guns and I expected they'd use them. You should be thankful I didn't use buckshot or they might be dead."

"All right," he said, sitting down. "What's there to talk about?"

"We were hired to transport a valuable example of sixteenth-century calligraphy to a buyer in Germany. Your bride claims it should be hers."

"Her father is a bastard," Fazzis told them. "He promised that to her on her wedding day. Now he is selling it just before her wedding because he doesn't approve of me. What's he ever done for her?"

"He recommended that we see her dance," Ives said.

"I don't even want that painting to keep," Delight informed them. "I just want it for my wedding day."

Stanton thought about it. "Why do you need spiders?"

It was Delight who answered. "Our wedding is to duplicate a Turkish wedding from a hundred years ago, with traditional costumes and a chariot for the bride's arrival. It will be at Wesley's country estate, where there are many trees. I read in a book that in your pre-Civil War South plantation slaves would be sent out to distribute large spiders on the trees. The webs they wove would then be covered with gold dust for weddings."

Ives looked doubtful. "I never heard of such a thing."

"I suppose it might be true," Stanton allowed.

"That's what the spiders are for. We will take them out to Wesley's place in the morning and hope they are in a spinning mood."

"Let's first visit your father and hope he is in a forgiving mood."

Bruno Tranle was anything but forgiving. He sat behind his desk glaring at Stanton and Ives. "I expected you to be in Germany by this time, delivering the calligraphy to Meinz."

"You promised it for my wedding," Delight reminded him.

"That was before you became a belly dancer, my dear."

Ives spoke up then. "That can't upset you too much. You recommended Turkish Delight to Stanton and me."

"I can appreciate her art without identifying her as my daughter."

"Can't we have a compromise here?" Stanton suggested. "You allow her to display the calligraphy at her wedding ceremony tomorrow and we'll fly it to Germany the next day."

"What if someone tries to steal or damage it during the wedding?" he asked.

"Ives and I will guarantee its safety," Stanton promised, avoiding his partner's icy stare as he spoke.

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Bruno Tranle glanced at his daughter. "Is that agreeable with you, Sophie?"

"Sophie?" Ives repeated.

The dancer snorted. "Did you think I was born with the name Turkish Delight?" Then, to her father, she nodded. "It is agreeable with me. I only want the painting for my wedding day."

Fazzis, who'd remained silent in the corner until now, stepped forward to shake his future father-in-law's hand. "You have my promise that Sophie will have a good life."

"Let us hope so."

Once they were alone, Ives berated her partner. "We're guaranteeing the safety of that thing worth nearly a million dollars?"

"Otherwise he never would have agreed. It won't be difficult. Prattos was killed because someone saw him arrive with that canvas bag and thought it contained the calligraphy. Another attempt will probably be made tomorrow, the last chance before it flies off to Germany. We'll catch the killer in the act and save the painting."

"How will we know who it is?"

"I already know," Stanton told her. "All we have to do is keep our thief from getting it."

The wedding day was bright with sunshine without being uncomfortably warm. That afternoon, arriving at the Fazzis estate with its palatial house on the Bosphorus, they seemed to enter another dimension of time. There were Arabs in turbans and Turks in traditional red fezzes that hadn't been worn since the government outlawed them after the First World War. Everything was as it might have been a hundred years earlier, and among the trees they could see the spider webs with their golden dust.

Wesley Fazzis, dressed in the formal wedding clothes of the last century, greeted his guests as they arrived. Stanton recognized some of the employees from the Bosphorus Cafe, including Guzine Guler, the manager, and one of the other dancers. Some wore modern dress, but many had gone along with the theme of the past.

Glancing out at the road, Ives asked, "Isn't that Ersu, the vendor who sold you that shotgun?"

"It looks like him," Stanton agreed. "I wonder what he's selling at a fancy wedding."

Bruno Tranle accompanied his daughter in the bride's chariot, dressed as some nobleman from a past time. Delight herself was all but unrecognizable in a traditional Turkish bridal gown. Stanton and Ives saw the prized calligraphy displayed amidst floral arrangements on the wide porch of the house, where the wedding would take place. "It is a thing of beauty," Ives agreed. "I can understand why Delight would want it at her wedding."

"And why someone would murder to get it."

After the brief nonreligious ceremony, guests were ushered into

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a large ballroom for the wedding dinner. They congratulated the bride and groom, but Stanton was more interested in watching the calligraphy on the porch. "You'd better cover the side yard," he told Ives. "Just in case."

They could hear music from the ballroom, and Stanton stepped behind one of the large floral displays to be out of sight. They had reached the crucial moment when the thief must act. The door of the house opened, but it was only the bride's father checking on his valued possession. "I'll have it removed shortly," he told Stanton.

"Fine. We have our morning flight to Germany."

It was ten minutes later when the restaurant manager, Guzine Guler, appeared and began removing the calligraphy from its stand and rolling it into a cylinder. That was when Stanton made his move. "Hold it, there!"

Guler turned, unfazed. "I was asked to remove it for safekeeping," he explained.

"Is that what you told Prattos when you stabbed him?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You thought he had the calligraphy, but it was only a box of spiders."

"There's no evidence against me."

"Perhaps not for a court of law, but there's enough to convince me. Ives said the dead man had a cube of Turkish Delight in his pocket."

"Everyone who dines at the restaurant gets one."

"But not wrapped in rice paper like the ones in your office. Prattos came to you when he couldn't find Delight or Wesley Fazzis. You obligingly took him up to her apartment, unlocked the door, and stabbed him to get the painting he didn't possess. As the building manager you would have had keys to all the apartments and offices. And Delight must have mentioned the valuable calligraphy to you when she was discussing her wedding, perhaps even hinting she was going to steal it from her father."

"Delight and Fazzis had keys, too."

"But Delight was downstairs dancing and Fazzis would have known Prattos was delivering spiders."

Guler muttered an obscenity and started running, still clutching the calligraphy. "Stop him, Ives!" Stanton shouted.

But he was off the porch before she could grab him. He stiff-armed her and kept on running across the lawn.

"You all right?" Stanton asked, helping her to her feet.

"He's getting away!"

And he was. They took off after him, but he was a fast runner with a sizable lead. He headed through the trees, running toward one of the big gold-dusted cobwebs. Then suddenly he was on the ground, tangled in wire, and they had him.

"The spiders weren't spinning," the bridegroom explained later. "We had to construct the webs ourselves out of wire." ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

A MAN IS KNOCKING AT THE DOOR

by Rodolfo Pérez Valero

English translation by the author.

The drizzle is just a sticky dirty dust that dulls the outlines of things as the man hurries to the porch, goes straight for the door, and pushes the button. From inside, the muffled sound of the bell strikes him like a long-gone memory that surges in a dream. Silence. A glance at his watch . . . a hand to his cheek. The faint shadow of his recently shaven beard gives a virile touch to his young face.

Cuban Rodolfo Pérez Valero was one of the seven founding members of the International Association of Crime Writers in 1986. He has won the Cuban National Prize for Crime Literature three times and the Semana Negra Prize for Best Short Story for this tale and for three others. He is currently a writer for Univision Network News.

Nobody opens. The man rings again and stays still to catch any sound. He looks at the door, he looks at both sides of the street, he looks at his watch. He's uneasy now. He raises his hand to the bell but a metallic click stops him. The man is aware that the peephole is open and he's being watched.

"What do you want?"

It's the cracked voice of an old woman. The man takes the wallet out of his pocket, opens it, and flashes it at the peephole.

"Police. Would you mind opening up?"

A pause. Something tense, uncomfortable, arises between the man and the eye that's watching him. At last, the peephole is closed, the latches are released, and the door is opened. A woman in that indefinite transition from sixty to seventy years old examines him from head to foot as her hands squeeze a little white handkerchief.

Story and translation ©2008 by Rodolfo Pérez Valero

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"Are you Maria?"

"Marina," she corrects him.

"Yes, Marina. That's it. Can I come in?"

The woman nods. The man steps in. She closes the door and with an outstretched hand invites him to proceed to the next room. She follows behind, offers him a rocking chair, and chooses a place for herself on the sofa. He brings out a cold, studied smile. The woman continues to press the handkerchief in her hands.

"You'll excuse me for the delay and for asking first," she begins, "but with that killer around I don't open to any man I don't know. . . . Well, you're a cop . . ." She stares at the trendy clothes and the hair that's a bit too long. "But, I mean, you look too young to be a policeman."

"I just graduated," he explains, keeping the same smirk, which suddenly flits away from his lips as he bends towards her. "And we have information that the perpetrator of those crimes may be coming here. They've sent some cops to the area, and the captain dispatched me to this house." His voice becomes grave when he adds: "You know that, up to now, the victims have always been old women . . . elderly, I should say . . . and generally, they live alone. Do you live alone?" The woman nods. "That's why the captain sent me here: to protect you."

The woman fights to put forth an unworried smile: "But how did you get that information—that the man is coming here?"

"He told us himself." The young man smiles with pride. "You're a woman, older, you live alone . . . and you do have some fine possessions, don't you?"

"Yes . . . some jewels I kept from when my husband was alive, and a few presents my grandson has given me. But how could that man know such things?"

"Maybe he makes some inquires before choosing his victims. It's not hard. People talk too much in a neighborhood. You just have to go to the market and listen. It's amazing the things you hear down there. They talk about everything: themselves, their relatives, neighbors."

The whisper of the rain creates a strange intimacy between the young man and the old woman. He, now sure of himself, studies her openly. By the order of the house, the woman seems to be a clean person, but her hair could be better cared for and so could the apron that, over the dress, presses her sagging flesh. She evades his cross-examining look and fixes a loose curl before she asks him, "What do you know about the murders?"

The man glances at the ceiling, shrugs, and then decides to give away some unimportant information: the victims stay home alone almost the whole day; they all have a degree of economic security; the killer steals their jewels, money, and other possessions; until now he hasn't broken in, perhaps he has come through a window, but it's supposed that the victims themselves have opened their doors to him; he surely takes advantage of some subterfuge to make them let him in.

The woman is trembling, but her curiosity proves to be greater

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than her fears.

"And when he gets in, what does he do?"

The young man enjoys the interest his words cause.

"By the traces he's left, we know that he hasn't been in a hurry to kill, nor, after he kills, to go; he searches thoroughly, looking for the really valuable things he can carry off."

"And why does he—"

"He kills the old women so as not to be identified. With a simple kitchen knife, the victim's own knife."

"He must be crazy."

"Maybe not. Remember that he doesn't kill just to kill, but to rob. He may be sane, and have an entirely normal appearance."

"Oh, so you don't know what he looks like?"

"No, nobody's seen him."

The woman keeps silent, as if wondering about what she's heard. Her hands, uneasy, discharge their tension on the handkerchief.

"You now! You haven't really explained how you got to know he'd come around here."

The man smiles. Then he takes his cell phone out.

"Excuse me for a second."

"Yes." She watches him. "You are very young for a cop."

"Don't you worry," says the man as he dials. "Trust me."

The woman casts her eyes down to the handkerchief in her hands.

"Lieutenant, it's me. I'm at Marina's house, as you ordered me." The man holds on a minute and turns back to the woman: "Your relatives . . . Do they come every day?"

"No, my son's not coming until tomorrow."

"No," reports the man at the telephone. "She'll be alone the whole night." He stands quiet for a few more seconds and then says: "Yes, it's okay. I'll stay here till it's all over." He closes the cell phone. "Are there any other doors in the house?" he asks the woman.

"Yes, the one in the kitchen to the yard."

"Can we see it? We must close everything to prevent access."

The woman gets up. She manages to control the alteration in her face and hands.

"Come along," she says and starts walking down the inner corridor.

The man follows behind. He's watching the woman's disordered hair. On each side of the corridor there's a closed door, which the man examines as they pass. They both get to the kitchen and she points to the open door.

"Let's get it closed," he commands with decision. She holds back. "It's necessary," he insists.

"I never close it until I go to sleep," the woman assures him. She looks outside. "It's raining so hard!" She hesitates a few seconds but finally closes the door and fastens the two latches. Then she notices that the man is sweating.

He seems to understand what she is thinking.

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"Could you give me a glass of water?" he asks. "It's hot."

The woman takes a glass from the cupboard, opens the refrigerator, fills it, and hands it to the man. As he drinks, his eyes scan the kitchen, passing over other details and stopping at a point.

"Those two knives are like the ones he uses."

"It's awful," says the woman, and shakes again.

"Thank you for the water." He hands back the glass and, cautiously, he adds: "Those rooms, are the windows closed? Aren't there attractive things that could be seen from outside and attract a robber?"

"Yes . . . My son has brought some presents, but the windows . . . I closed them when the rain started."

The man becomes still and brings out his cold smile once again. She seems to doubt. "I suppose you want to check them?" He nods. "Well, come on, there are two bedrooms, one's empty, the other is where I sleep."

They go back along the corridor. She leads the way. She gets to one door, opens it, and steps aside to let him in.

"Excuse me for asking you this again," she persists, "but you have not explained why you are so certain the killer is going to come *here.*"

As he goes to the window and checks it, he explains that at the last crime scene they discovered traces of pen strokes on the telephone message pad. The police had managed to decipher what was written on the missing page above. And they were able to determine that it wasn't the murdered woman's handwriting nor even that of one of her relatives. There were some addresses . . .

" . . . among them, this number, this street, this block. And, as you live alone . . ."

"The killer made a mistake," comments the woman when the man comes out of the room and they both go to the other door. The woman opens it. "This is my room," she says, and steps aside.

The man takes two steps across the threshold. From there he glances at the closed window and his eyes roll down to the bed, where he takes in several necklaces and rings, apparently gold, and money, a lot of money. He also notices that the doors of the wardrobe are open, the drawers are pulled out, and everything is in a mess, as if someone had just made an exhaustive search.

"What's that?!" he asks and, advancing, he discovers, horrified, two feet that stretch out under the other side of the bed.

"That's Marina," says the woman behind him and stabs him once and then again, while grabbing him strongly by his hair and pulling his head back. His painful cry is lost like a crazy whisper in the rain hammering against the window. His legs don't hold him anymore and he falls down. The woman removes the apron, cleans her hand, wipes the knife, and drops both weapon and apron on the still-shaking body. Then, with the white handkerchief, she cleans the door handle and goes straight to the jewels and the money on the bed.

Outside, it rains. ●

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The Wisdom of Serpents

by David Dean

When Josh spied the writhing ball of serpents that he was being lowered into, he cried out to his best friend belaying him into the cave from above, and his descent was mercifully halted. He dangled some twenty feet above the knot of snakes that glistened in the shaft of sunlight that pierced the aperture through which he had entered, and called out in a shaky voice, "Snakes, Paul! There's a bunch of snakes in here!"

David Dean is Avalon, New Jersey's new chief of police. *EQMM* has had stories from cops who also write fiction before, but this may be our first contributing chief. Chief Dean has worked full-time on the force through all of his many years of writing. Yet he rarely writes about cops, and even when he does, his tales are not procedurals.

After a moment's pause, his descent was resumed.

"Paul! Paul! Did you hear me? Pull me up . . . there's snakes down here," Josh pleaded.

As Paul continued to feed the rope through the pulley on the tripod, he contemplated just letting go and allowing Josh to hurtle the remaining distance to the fate that awaited him in the snake hole; packing up the caving gear and leaving. But his plans had failed to take into account that as it required two hands to lower Josh to his hideous death, his ears remained open to his friend's piteous cries, and so he faltered and the pulley squeaked to a halt once more. Then he remembered the home pregnancy-test kit so carelessly discarded by Vanda in the bathroom waste basket and thought, *All you have to do is open your hands . . . just release.* Within his gloves, water began to seep from his palms.

"Paul, can you hear me? What are you doin'? It's not funny, dude! Pull me up right now! I mean it, man! I'm gonna kick your ass if you don't!"

The voice that wafted up through the hole in the earth was

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fainter now. Paul guessed that Josh now hung a scant twenty feet above the torpid nest of vipers that lay below.

"Pull me up . . . please! I think they know I'm in here! They're starting to move around a lot. We're best of friends, for God's sake! I don't know what you're thinking, Paul, but it's not true! We've been friends all our lives!"

It was true, from boyhood to manhood, twenty-eight years' worth of friendship lay between them. Compared to their lifetime relationship, Vanda was a recent addition. Paul had met and fallen in love with her his senior year of college, and they had married the following year. Five years of marriage. Seen in a certain light, she was almost an interloper, and considering the recent events that had brought Paul to this lonely place in the mountains, a poisonous one, not unlike the hibernating snakes that lay waiting at Josh's feet.

In keeping with his nature, Josh had been a most pliant victim; never questioning Paul's story of prehistoric pictographs inadvertently discovered while on a winter day's ramble in the mountains. Paul had found it almost distressingly easy to convince the easy-going Josh that today's trek was simply to be a "sneak preview" in preparation for a detailed exploration of the cavern when the weather warmed, hence, there was no need of rappel racks or ascenders—Josh had only to relax and play tourist as Paul lowered him into the pothole for a quick peek at their discovery.

Of course, there were no cave paintings that Paul knew of, even though the story of his chancing upon the vertical cave was entirely true. He had only just missed falling through the flush opening the day before. No one could have been more surprised, as this was an area of mountains well known to Josh and Paul . . . Vanda, too. When he had lowered a flashlight down to have a look, he had at first thought he was looking at a floor of boiling mud. Once his eyes had adjusted, however, he had understood what he was seeing and contemplated for several moments flinging himself down amongst them.

The rope began to swing violently from side to side and Paul guessed that Josh was attempting to climb back up under his own steam. Without ascenders, this would be a formidable task, even for someone as strong as Josh. Suddenly, he was aware of the tremendous strain on his own arms, shoulders, and the great muscles between his shoulder blades. His gloves were staining with the moisture squeezed from his palms as he struggled to maintain stasis against Josh's exertions.

From below came a strangled cry; silence; then the rope snapped taut, nearly snatching Paul off his feet. Josh had lost his grip and fallen back to the end of the rope, gaining nothing for all his effort. From deep within the earth, Paul could hear his friend groan. It was impossible to tell whether it was from pain or despair. The line that suspended Josh swayed gently from side to side, and after a few moments there came the unmistakable sound of weeping.

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"You're a bastard, Paul," Josh called up. "I don't know why you're doing this, but it's wrong! She's just messed up your mind . . . mine too, for that matter." Paul could hear the tears of self-pity in his friend's voice. He had always been the weaker of the two, even if he was the larger and stronger. "But it's not like you think, if that's what this is all about. Not at all, man. Is that what you think? Paul? I know you can hear me up there. Answer me, damn it . . . please." Paul could hear him crying again.

Paul tried to think of the answer he could give that would adequately explain why he was killing his best friend—a succinct indictment of a friend's betrayal and a wife's infidelity. But the words remained bound up in a heart seething with hurt and anger, and oddly, with the loss of a companion that was yet to come. A great wave of aloneness washed over him and rendered him mute with future bereavement.

Big, athletic, handsome, not-too-bright Josh. Always the bachelor; the perennial third wheel at Paul and Vanda's dinner table. Six years after college and he still opened cans for dinner. Hapless, helpless Josh, and the women loved him for it. Ever the affable "catch" to whom married women loved to introduce their single friends, and who remained their friend long after the affair was over and marriage never proffered. The high-school star athlete who simply grew into the game-winning coach. The friend Paul had tutored through every grade, including college, and shared more meals, beer, and adventures with than he could possibly recall; the near constant companion of countless camping trips, hiking excursions, rafting expeditions, mountain-climbing forays, and caving adventures. The steady, strong arm that had shielded Paul from harm on numerous occasions and had probably saved his life more than once. The same friend that gravity and exhaustion would soon snatch from his grasp whether he willed it or no.

The rope began to swing wildly and Paul knew that Josh was attempting to save himself once more. He could discern his steady, exhausted huffs as he pulled himself hand-over-hand up the rope. Paul wondered if Josh had thought to divest himself of the heavy backpack he wore. The pulley swayed from side to side as Josh attacked the rope and, alarmingly, the motion began to be mirrored by the metal tripod that it hung from and that straddled the hole in the earth that he had been lowered into. The stakes that anchored the frame to the stony soil began to work themselves loose and the violent motion transferred itself to Paul as well, causing him to rock from foot to foot. He understood instantly that he would not be able to hold on much longer if this was allowed to continue, and the choice of saving or killing Josh would no longer be his.

"Josh! Stop climbing! You're going to rock the whole frame over if you keep it up!" The rope continued to switch back and forth like a windshield wiper as Paul struggled for purchase. "Josh, stop it! Do

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you hear me?"

Slowly, the rope's movements began to subside and Paul was able to relax somewhat, in spite of the fire that was spreading through his muscles. From below he could hear that Josh had started to cry once more and detected within the sobs that note of despair that denotes extreme exhaustion. The line shuddered once, twice, and then a third time. Josh had dropped back to the end of the rope by degrees.

"Help! Help me, somebody, please!" Josh's tired voice echoed up from the cavern.

Paul could stand it no longer. "Josh, I'm gonna pull you up! Shed the pack and I'll pull you back up!"

There was a pause, and then through the blood singing in his ears, Paul heard a distant thump. "The snakes didn't like that," Josh called out. "Not even a little bit!" Josh began to laugh as if it was the funniest thing in the world, and Paul pictured the riled serpents striking the rucksack again and again in their impotent fury, and found nothing funny about it.

"Hold on, Josh, here goes!" And with that, Paul began to back away from the hole, digging the heels of his boots into the flinty soil with each wrenching step, red-faced and panting with exertion, and inch by gut-straining inch began to reverse the unequal tug-of-war with Josh's two hundred pounds and unrelenting gravity.

Then the pulley gave way.

In an instant gravity regained the upper hand and Paul was being pulled rapidly toward the lip of the hole. Even as he registered that the eyebolt that had connected the pulley to the tripod had snapped, sending the heavy pulley sliding down the rope towards the helpless Josh, he also saw the hole yawn wider to receive him as well. Freed from the fulcrum provided by the frame and pulley, the rope snapped against the lip of the aperture and began to hum and smoke against the rough edges, dropping Josh ever closer to the angry, waiting snakes, even as it effortlessly dragged Paul to the same fate. From beneath the earth, Paul heard a sharp cry of pain as the pulley struck Josh's hands where they clasped the lifeline.

Without conscious thought, Paul sat suddenly and spread his legs, at once lowering his center of gravity and allowing the dirt and stones gathered painfully between them in his headlong rush to further slow him with additional weight and drag. The now useless tripod appeared to rush forward and he lined up the soles of his boots with its legs. With a jolt of agony to his knee joints, he impacted, and held, even as the line went slack and a low wail drifted up from the snake pit, punctuated by almost comical hoots of unrestrained terror. Josh was in amongst the snakes.

When Paul had discovered the hole the day before, murder had not been in his thoughts, but once he saw what lay within, the plan had sprung full-blown into his head. Just like that, he had gone from

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wronged husband and friend to murderer, when a mere twenty-four hours before, it had been he who was the victim.

It had been the pregnancy test that had finally opened his eyes, though why it should have taken that, Paul could not fathom. Surely, everything that he had needed to know had lain before his eyes for some time, yet it had required a small, mass-produced medical device that was sold over the counter in every local pharmacy to provide the spark that burned away his blindness. It was like Vanda to be so careless.

She had blown into their lives like some primal feminine force during the first month of their senior year, as Paul and Josh sat hunched over a map of their next backpacking trip—a whirlwind of long black hair and colorful scarves, dog-eared textbooks and swirling skirts, that suddenly commanded their secluded spot in the student center. With a great sigh, she had sunk onto the sagging sofa next to Paul, allowing her books and papers to cascade onto the coffee table and their terrain map, her great silver earrings tinkling as she threw back her head to stare at the ceiling. After a moment, she had raised herself to regard the two young men she had intruded upon, fixed her grey eyes upon Paul's, widened them dramatically, and announced, "Professor Rais is going to be a problem."

Paul had no idea to whom she was referring or what his expression must have been that day, and he had not bothered to look over at Josh for confirmation of this apparition. It had been enough, at that moment, to simply look back into Vanda's eyes—eyes that had sought his and, remarkably, not Josh's. "I believe he expects me to study in my senior year," she added; then, turning to the map, she asked abruptly, "What's all this?"

"We're going . . . planning," Paul had corrected himself, "a backpacking trip."

"Really," she had said. "I'd like to do that sometime."

For the briefest of moments, Paul had studied her profiled face, strikingly white and smooth as porcelain, her ebony tresses tangled in amongst the dozen necklaces that hung over the tabletop from her slender neck. An image floated unbidden before his mind's eye of her wildly dancing in a lonely clearing, naked but for her outlandish jewelry and glowing beneath a hunter's moon. That had been it. "Wanna come?" he had asked.

She had regarded him quizzically for several heartbeats, an animal sensing a trap, and then calmly nodded while reaching over and removing a smudge of chocolate, the remnant of an earlier energy bar, from his chin with her tongue-moistened thumb. Her unexpected touch had paralyzed him, even as she had deigned to finally notice Josh, who had sat slack-jawed throughout this spell-weaving. With a broad smile, she had offered him her hand, which he clumsily grasped.

The three were seldom apart from that day forward, except during the prophesied interference of the demanding Professor Rais, her

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anthropology teacher and chair of her department, and something of a local celebrity for his travels to distant jungles where he immersed himself in the culture and rites of primitive societies. That year had flown by, filled with countless hikes and climbs, and even a week spent in the wilderness of the Great Smokies during a heartbreakingly beautiful spring.

Vanda was everything Paul had fantasized on that first meeting, unremittingly feminine, yet elemental, in some indecipherable way. She seldom had to be helped along, even on the most arduous journeys, and her joy in nature was unbridled and infectious. It had seemed to Paul that she had subtly influenced his view of the natural world—no longer did he see it as a primeval struggle betwixt man and nature, one in which he and Josh were challenged to master, but slowly and through her eyes, he began to perceive it as some type of cooperative venture, a partnership between the three adventurers and the untrammeled land. She had dashed about from one to the other of them, tirelessly pointing out the salubrious properties of hitherto unnoticed flowers, ferns, and leaves, laughingly providing unlikely foods from mosses and mushrooms for her reluctant followers. That which Paul and Josh had marched forth to conquer with their youthful strength and bravado, they found to have willfully surrendered to their enchantress. Paul would not have been surprised to have seen birds perched on her shoulders or wolves lying at her small, booted feet, as he too had been snared without the least violence.

Like everything else in their relationship, it seemed their marriage had come about as surely and naturally as a new season. It had appeared to simply unfold before Paul's eyes like the warm sun that rose above the treetops and reflected off the still, blue lake on the shore of which they took their vows. Josh, uncomfortably stuffed into a rented tuxedo, had nervously acted the part of Paul's best man. The bride had worn green: a diaphanous layering of gossamer materials that accentuated her ample bosom and tiny waist while trailing to the earth about her ankles even as her delicate green shoes peeked out from the foliage. She had worn her dark, luxuriant hair up in a complicated arrangement of braids and ribbons, surmounted by a crown of tiny wildflowers, which only served to somehow accentuate the superabundance of her shining tresses —a raven-haired Tinker Bell arrayed for the Solstice Ball.

The only jarring note that Paul could recall was his mother's rather shocked comment on first viewing the bride on her wedding day. With a small cry, she had raised a white-gloved hand to her mouth and gasped to his father, "Oh my Lord, Edwin, she looks like a heathen princess," just loud enough for Paul to have overheard as he awaited Vanda at the makeshift altar.

A second moment had occurred at the giving-away of the bride: The exotic Professor Rais, looking tall and rather elegant in his tailored tux and with swept-back, shoulder-length graying hair, had

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stumbled slightly on the way to the lake's edge, betraying his somewhat advanced stage of inebriation, and managed to step on the bride's hem. The sound of rending material was only just matched by the suppressed groan from the feminine members of the assembled. Yet the bride appeared to take no notice and proceeded with her unsteady stand-in (Vanda's father had not been heard from for many years) to her waiting groom. Rais, flushing somewhat, manfully squared his narrow shoulders and hastened to keep up.

Once their goal had been reached and the bride safely delivered, if somewhat the worse for wear, he breathed the noxious fumes of his earlier imbibements over the happy couple, then attempted to kiss the bride on the lips through her veil. With a small shove from Vanda's gloved hand, he had disengaged and stumbled hastily away, suddenly visibly and obviously intoxicated. Her smile for Paul, radiant behind the green veil and like some exotic and beautiful creature glimpsed within its lair, had swept away the awkwardness of the moment, and Paul as well. He had wished to never be free of her from that time forth.

Paul crouched at the edge of the hole and listened, but no sounds came from within. Far below, in the patch of sunlight that reached the cavern floor, he could make out Josh's backpack, but his friend was not with it. "Josh," he called down. "Josh!" Silence, laden with reproach, wafted up to him with the cold draft from the cavern. The pack shifted slightly and appeared to tip to one side; something long and sinewy gathered itself atop it to better enjoy the meager shaft of sunlight, and appeared to stare up at him. The cavern floor undulated within the circle of illumination, the snakes so thickly intertwined that only when one's triangular head or sharp tail separated from the writhing mass could Paul comprehend that it was not one living, multi-tentacled creature in uneasy repose. He drew back from the edge, grateful there was no tension on the rope, then thought of Josh still tethered to the other end down there in the dark, in the midst of serpents. "Josh!" Paul cried out once more as remorse and terror for his friend flooded his heart. "I'm coming down. I'm sorry . . . so sorry! Do you hear me?"

"Yeah, I hear you . . . and you should be." Josh's voice, by a trick of the subterranean acoustics, sounded as if he were just beneath the lip of the cave's opening, and startled Paul into falling back. "By the way, I'm gonna kill you when you get down here, you sonofabitch."

Paul's relief was so profound that tears welled in his eyes and he hastily wiped them away with his sleeve. "Where are you? I can't see you from up here."

"I'm about ten feet south, I think, of my ruck . . . and the snakes. They seemed to want to stay in the sun, which is fine by me. When the pulley snapped and the rope whipped up against the lip, it swung me clear of them...at least for now. It's the only luck I've had

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today . . . the pulley broke some of the fingers on my right hand, Paul."

Paul understood this to be bad news indeed; it meant that Josh could do very little in his own rescue. "That's okay," he answered, attempting to sound sure of himself. "How many feet is it, do you think, from the cave opening to the floor?"

A slight pause followed this question, as Josh calculated. "Thirty, give or take a few feet."

Paul trusted Josh's judgment in this matter . . . he was always the better climber. "All right then, we've got plenty of rope here. Can you unhook yourself?"

"Yeah, right, I'm gonna untie and let you pull up the rope. That would be real intelligent."

Paul knew he deserved that, but sighed with exasperation nonetheless. "Listen, Josh, if I wanted to leave you, I'd just untie my end and drop it down the hole, dismantle the tripod, and go home."

There was another pause as Josh digested this piece of obvious truth. "That's what you were gonna do, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Paul replied honestly. "Yeah, it was."

"My fingers are broke, I told you. I don't know if I can."

Paul could hear the pain and fear in Josh's voice. "Josh, I won't leave you, I promise. Just stay in your harness and send the rope up."

After a few moments, Paul could feel vibrations in the woven fibers he held, then Josh called out, "All right! It's free. . . . You better not leave me, you sonofabitch. I'm still gonna kick your ass when this is all over!"

Paul began to haul the line up and coil it at his feet. Once he had Josh's end he quickly routed it over the top crosspiece of the tripod and left several feet to dangle over the hole. The other end he secured around the bole of an old-growth oak that leaned over the shale-covered clearing. He knew their rope to be one hundred feet long, which was just enough, with a little extra, he hoped, for his purpose. Returning to the tripod, he carefully rigged the dangling line beneath his armpits, cursing himself for not having brought any of his own gear, and knelt down once more.

"Josh, what are the snakes doing?"

"Nothing much . . . waiting for you, probably," he answered with a lame attempt at humor.

"No, seriously, have they moved at all? I'm thinking they might move with the sunlight." Paul glanced up at the sun edging its way into the western sky. The day was getting on.

"Yeah," Josh called back excitedly. "Yeah, I think they are. They've moved away from the pack some."

"That's good," Paul said. " 'Cause I'm going to drop a big coil of rope down there and I don't want to rile them up too much."

"Oh shit . . . wait, wait, let me get a handful of rocks or something."

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Paul could hear Josh scrabbling amongst the stones with his good hand for missiles. "Okay, go ahead."

Reaching beneath the tripod and across the two-foot aperture, Paul tugged the heavy coil to the edge and let gravity pull it in. This was followed by a muffled thump and a slight tug on his chest. Without waiting, lest his nerve fail him, Paul seized the rope that dangled opposite him and gave it a good tug, satisfying himself with the corresponding pull on his armpits, and began to lower himself into the snake hole. As he sank into the darkness, Josh began to yell. "Jesus Christ, Paul, you've really stirred 'em up! They're going everywhere!"

From his lofty vantage point, Paul could now see the beam from Josh's helmet lamp swinging wildly about the cavern floor, and just discernible beneath his friend's wild shouts arose the dry, rasping murmur of hundreds of scaled bodies intertwining and disengaging simultaneously, in menacing petulance.

"Josh," Paul called out. "Don't move around! Stay where you are and throw rocks at those that come near you! They'll settle down in a few minutes and go back to the sunlight."

Paul could see Josh with his back against the cave wall, futilely chucking stones with his uninjured left hand, but as he was right-handed, his efforts were having little effect other than to gain the snakes' interest. Each rock that landed amongst them received several cursory strikes. Paul, dry-mouthed and sweating profusely, continued to lower himself, hand over hand, to the floor of the cave. Now that he was much closer, he thought these reptiles to be copper-heads, but wasn't sure . . . Vanda would have known at a glance; she seemed able to name every creature that crawled, swam, or flew. "Josh, settle down and try not to move your feet . . . they're attracted to the vibrations in the earth . . . that's how they hear you." Vanda had taught him that, as well.

As Josh's light whipped from side to side, Paul made out a possible solution. "Josh, there's a big rock to your left. Just ease over and step up onto it."

Like a small child at an adult's command, Josh did as he was bidden, sliding his feet ever so carefully as he edged along the wall, and hooting like an owl at each movement on the ground around him. With almost comic exaggeration, he took a slow, giant step up upon reaching the rock and placed one booted foot on top; then with a final hoot, snatched the other up to join the first. Once he was sure of his balance, he aimed a sickly, frightened grin up at Paul and then froze into spelunking statuary.

As Paul hung suspended ten feet above the surface of the cavern, the serpents did, indeed, begin to lose interest in the previous commotion and began to make their way singly and in writhing knots back towards the waiting patch of late-winter sunlight—a thousand crawling exclamation marks coalescing into a rustling heap of drowsy

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venom. Fortunately for Paul's plan, that saving ray of warmth steadily, if almost imperceptibly, moved further into the recesses of the cave and drew the cranky reptiles with it. Paul resumed his descent and gingerly placed his feet upon the earth. Without untying the rope, he softly walked the short distance to where Josh perched like some lonely, subterranean lighthouse.

"Come on," he whispered. "Let's get you the hell out of here."

Placing a trembling hand on Paul's shoulder to steady himself, Josh stepped carefully down and allowed himself to be led to where his backpack still lay. Once there, Paul unrigged himself and quickly and expertly tied a bowline knot in the end of the rope and clipped the carabiner on Josh's harness through the loop.

"All right, then," he said, giving the line a slight tug. "Josh, I'm going to haul you up, but you're going to have to help even though you've got a busted paw. Here's how it will work: Using your good hand, you pull with me each time I say 'Heave.' In between, release while I hold down here, and reach up for another handful for the next heave. Got it?"

"Yeah," Josh answered uncertainly. "But what about you?"

"Once you are up top, drop your end back down to me; I'll tie myself off and haul myself back up the same way I came down. Nothing to it."

Josh looked dubious. "You think this is going to be easy?"

"No," Paul answered truthfully. "No, I don't."

"Who's to say I won't just walk off and leave you, once I get out? You'd deserve it."

"Here are my car keys so you don't have to walk all the way back to town," Paul said, fishing them from his pocket and making to hand them to the other man. "You can just tell Vanda we got separated down here and you couldn't find me. That should make you both happy."

Josh studied Paul for several moments, then roughly folded Paul's fingers around the keys with his good hand. "Just get us out of here before those snakes get curious again; I'll straighten your sorry ass out when we get up top."

Paul pocketed the keys, then took a good two-handed grip on the rope. Josh did the same with his left hand. "Ready?" Paul asked. Josh nodded. "Heave!" Josh rose several inches into the air. "Ready . . . heave!" Another few inches were attained. Inch by straining inch Josh began to ascend. With sweat running freely into his eyes and down his ribs, Paul wondered if he was truly up to this task; even if he was able to get Josh to the surface, he now doubted he would have the strength remaining to haul himself out afterwards.

He needn't have worried, for when Josh was only about ten feet from his starting point, they both became aware of a new sound that now seemed to have entered the snake lair. Josh noticed it first and called down, "What's that? You hear something, Paul?"

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Paul, grateful for a chance to rest, belayed the rope and listened. In the echoing silence there *was* something—a faint, repetitious ping, the sound of a pipe expanding with the heat or contracting with the cold. Paul threw his head back and peered upwards. "Josh," he began, then was cut off by the squeal of fatigued metal unwillingly assuming new form. With a great clang of alarm the tripod surrendered its only useful shape, tossing Josh back into the darkness in rebuke. The cavern floor received him with even less ceremony, driving the wind from his lungs with its unyielding soil, while from behind them the dry agitated hum of shifting scales filled the darkness once more.

After graduation, the three of them had simply returned home to the small city nestled in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains where they had all grown up. Paul had found it remarkable, and somewhat mysterious in a pleasant kind of way, that Vanda and he had never crossed paths during those early years. She had attended public schools, he had attended the parochial schools of his diocese; she had lived in a blue-collar enclave surrounding the now defunct mills, he had been brought up in an old, leafy, upscale suburb; she had spent her first two years of advanced schooling at a community college, out of financial necessity, he, and Josh, of course, had gone straight to university out of high school; whereas he had been thoroughly indoctrinated in his Catholic faith, she was vague on the subject of religion and checked "No affiliation" on the few forms that requested such information. Everything about her, in his eyes, was spontaneous and her own; as unlike the carefully prepared Paul as he could want. She was the wildness that he unconsciously sought on his and Josh's many journeys into the great forests and mountains yet could never release within his own soul.

It amused and pleased him that she had, for his parents' sake, agreed to be married within the Catholic faith, which required out of religious necessity that she be baptized in the same. Even the months of instruction that preceded this sacrament drew not one word of complaint. If anything, she had appeared to devote to it the same studious inquiry as she had her primitive-cultures courses, though with a bemused tolerance that was sometimes coupled with astonishment at some of the more esoteric "mysteries" of the Church. Yet, for Paul's sake, and more importantly his parents', she had submitted cheerfully enough. Her only rebellion had been her insistence that the wedding Mass be celebrated out of doors, and in her choice of colors in bridal wear. These expressions of herself had delighted Paul, and he didn't care a penny that her conversion was less than genuine.

However, as to her father's absence on the day of their wedding, and indeed, as to his disappearance from her family altogether, her candor disappeared. It was the only subject that Paul could not draw her out on. Though in Paul's eyes Vanda was often mysterious, as all natural creatures are, it was only in the matter of her father

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that he glimpsed a furtive side of her personality, and it troubled him as a limp in a pet might worry its owner—the suffering animal cannot speak and explain the source of its pain, therefore the loving master must carefully knead its muscles and bones and probe its paws until the source of discomfort is discovered and relieved. He did so with wine one night.

It was after dinner, towards the end of their first year of marriage, as they lay curled together on the living room sofa. The night air was soft, as it sometimes is in early spring, laden with the scent of honeysuckle and the warming earth, and playing over their naked bodies as it billowed the curtains gently to and fro. They were on their third glass of wine, celebrating the end of a work day for no other reason than they were young and still in the first blush of their love. Paul lay snug against his young bride's backside, his arms wrapped tightly round her. "Do you ever miss your old man?" he had asked softly.

He was answered with an immediate tension in Vanda's body, and silence. He could feel her withdrawing from him and regretted the question but could not call it back. Then, after what seemed a very long time, she had replied in a quiet, level voice, "Of course I do, Paul, he's my father. Every girl needs a father."

"Yeah," he had said just as quietly, desperately thinking of how to continue the exchange he had encouraged.

But she had slid from his arms like mercury and padded across the bare wooden floors towards the bathroom, supremely indifferent to her nakedness and all the more magnificent to Paul because of it. Then she had turned and faced him, her only adornments her ever-present bangles, necklaces, and jangling earrings, and said, "He wanted to be more than just a father, Paul."

"Oh," was all he could think to reply, as he did not understand her meaning; and with that she had withdrawn into the shower.

He awoke in the small hours of that night with his heart beating like something caged and furious within his chest, and turned to his wife. The shadows of branches outside their window played restlessly across her glowing skin in the moonlight and Paul had reached out a hand to touch her, then held it back in pity. He had not wished to wake her and have her see his face, for he had come upon the meaning of her earlier statement in the black depths of a dreamless sleep and would not have her see the horror and pity he feared might be mirrored there. Instead, he had lain back on his pillow once more and waited for his heart to slow its pace, and knew that he loved Vanda all the more for having the strength to create herself into the lovely, free-spirited woman that he so adored, in spite of her father's unnatural attentions and the stain of darkness that must surely dwell within her as a result.

Josh lay groaning and clutching his rib cage with his good hand; the light from his helmet lamp a will-o'-wisp playing restlessly on

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the thin rocky shell that separated Paul and him from the lighted world above. His companion's face appeared above him, grey and etched with lines of strain and fear. "You've killed us," Josh informed him through gritted teeth.

Paul knelt beside him and, uncharacteristically, seized his hand. "I'm so sorry, Josh. I'm so sorry. I haven't been thinking right. Ever since I found . . . did you bust a rib?" he asked, suddenly aware of Josh's labored breathing and grimacing face.

"Yeah, I think I did. But never mind about that now; that's the least of our worries. Help me over to those rocks before they find me lying here."

"They" had been drawn by the impact of Josh's fall, and as Paul's head whipped up in alarm, the sound of their approach was made all the more sinister by the stygian darkness that lay outside their faint circle of light. With a gasp, he heaved Josh to his feet, ignoring his moans, and the two men shuffled as silently as they could toward a heap of rubble that lay at the foot of a nearby wall. As gently as he could in their haste, Paul helped Josh up onto a large, flat-topped boulder, and quickly joined him. Breathing hard, they looked back to the spot where the rope still dangled beckoningly in the dimming illumination of Josh's lamp, and became aware by degrees that the floor was no longer flat, but heaving and alive. "Jesus Christ," Josh breathed.

"They'll go away," Paul promised, only half believing it himself. "They're just irritated with the commotion. They'll go back to the sunlight; they have to . . . for the warmth." He glanced back hopefully to the patch of sunlight that had lain at the back of the cave, and found that it had wandered to the cavern's limits, and would soon begin to climb the far wall where the snakes could not follow. The sun was rapidly descending in the winter sky and both men shifted closer to one another in the gathering chill and gloom.

"How much longer do you have on those batteries?" Paul asked, meaning the miner's lamp.

"Not long," Josh replied tonelessly. "An hour, maybe."

"Any spares?" Paul persisted.

"Yeah," Josh answered. "Right over there," he pointed at the backpack smothered in reptilian life. "Wanna get 'em?"

They fell into silence.

After a while Josh spoke again, "After you found what, exactly?"

Paul answered immediately, his thoughts never far from the discovery that had inspired their current circumstances. "The pregnancy test . . . it was positive. She's going to have your baby."

"My . . ." Josh began, then started to laugh; the echoes flying back and forth in the darkness.

"If you keep that up, I'll kill you for sure, and right now." Unseen by Josh, Paul fingered the hilt of the survival knife he wore on his belt.

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"No, no," Josh began, winding down. "Not me . . . not mine . . . no way!"

Paul turned a miserable face toward his friend. "Oh, and why's that?"

"Had 'em snipped, that's why. I've been neutered!" Josh began to cough with a liquid sibilance; caught his breath and resumed. "No way I was gonna get snagged into marriage and kids. That's not for me . . . never will be. Besides all that, I've never made it to first base with her. If we're gonna be truthful, and we may as well at this point, I would have if she'd have let me. She makes me a little crazy, I guess, always has really, but it never happened, Paul. So, if you wanted to kill me for being a bad friend with impure thoughts, then I guess you've got me dead to rights, but if it's for this baby, then you've got the wrong man."

Paul stared at his friend in stunned silence as the implications of what he had said began to make themselves felt. He knew that Josh was telling the truth; he had known him long enough to know. "Then who . . ." he began.

"What about you, for starters?" Josh interrupted him, still chuckling and coughing uncomfortably.

Paul turned away for a moment before speaking, then drew a deep breath. "Can't . . . we tried for a long time, but nothing. We both went to the doctor and had a few tests run. It was me . . . I can't." He lapsed into a shamed silence.

"Well, who's the lucky man?" Josh said.

Paul's head sank onto his drawn-up knees. "Shut up, Josh. Just shut up."

"Maybe we can ask her ourselves before long; she knows where we are."

Paul's head snapped around. "She does? I didn't tell her . . . under the circumstances," he finished lamely.

"No . . . but I did. She called me last night, said you were acting strange and for me to keep an eye on you. So when you showed up this morning wanting to go caving, I gave her a call while you were loading the car. She knows this area as well as we do now, and I pinpointed it pretty well, based on what you had told me. She'll come looking soon and see the equipment up top."

"Will she?" Both men glanced uneasily at the dwindling patch of sunlight that now had climbed the wall of the cave and threatened to vanish altogether in the greater shadows of the distant ceiling. Sundown was upon them and they could feel the temperature dropping perceptibly.

Josh switched off his lamp to conserve the batteries and the two men sat in shivering silence staring up at the hole they had descended through. As they watched, the sky dimmed and grayed, leached of color by the retreating sun, until the small opening faded into the surrounding blackness of their subterranean prison and

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vanished altogether. Paul and Josh shifted ever closer until they were sitting back to back in the darkness to ward off the dank cold.

"Just divorce her, Paul. She's not worth all this," Josh spoke into the silence.

"No, I can't; you know that . . . and so does she," he finished in a whisper.

Josh mulled this over, thinking how he had never been as serious as his friend in religious-studies class. In fact, he had never been as serious as Paul about anything. "For crying out loud, exceptions can be made; even by the almighty Church. She's pregnant with somebody else's baby, for Christ's sake!" He regretted the harsh choice of words as soon as they were uttered.

"No, it's not just that, Josh. I just can't . . . or won't, I guess. I love her."

"I feel sorry for you, Paul," Josh said gently. "And you don't even know who she's been seeing."

"No," Paul agreed. "Now I don't have the slightest clue. Nothing's changed, you see. That's why I figured it had to be you; you're always around. We've gone along in the same pattern for years—she goes to work; I go to work; two nights a week she drives back up to college for her graduate studies. And before you ask, I pay the tuition bills and I've helped her do research work for Professor Rais, so, yes, she really is . . ." He left the sentence unfinished; remembering the first words Vanda had ever spoken to him. A rush of familiar scenes swirled through his mind; memories now made unwholesome by the poison of unwelcome revelation. While above them, somewhere in the distance, arose the faint growl and grind of an approaching four-wheel-drive vehicle.

"Listen," Josh whispered. "You hear that?"

They both stood silently in expectation. The motor coughed and was extinguished. Paul guessed that the vehicle had arrived at the spot where he and Josh had parked, what seemed like a lifetime ago. Whoever they were, they would have to make the rest of the way on foot.

Josh hastily switched on his helmet lamp and aimed its failing beam at the cave's entrance; then both men waited, listening intently for the scrabble of loose stone that must accompany their rescuer's arrival. As they stared upward, Paul became aware of the cold, winking stars that were now visible in the distant firmament, while at the very limit of their portal to the living world, a slice of the moon peeked over the edge like the eye of a mischievous giant. From above, the rattle of stone and scree announced the arrival of their salvation.

Josh began to hop up and down and shout, "Hey, we're down here! We're down in the cave!" The cracked rib pressing into his lung prevented him from continuing and he lapsed into a fit of painful coughing that silenced his pleas. Paul said nothing and waited.

Far above, he could just make out the hiss and murmur of voices

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in subdued debate. The softer, higher voice appeared to be demanding something of the other. Then, after a pause, the rope that led to the surface was released and fell to join Paul and Josh in the pit.

Even as Josh struggled once more to his feet to cry out in consternation, Paul could just make out the silhouette of someone peering down into their tomb. The cold glow of the moon framed the long hair of their executioner, making it shimmer with silver streaks, even as Josh's lamp captured the flushed face. With a cry, Professor Rais vanished from their sight, and shortly thereafter, the clanking of the metal tripod could be heard as its wreckage was dragged down the slope, and the last evidence of Paul and Josh's plight was removed.

Josh began to weep, and Paul sat down next to him and placed his arm over his friend's shoulder, but said nothing. He had hoped to see Vanda one last time, and was dumb with sorrow that she had deprived him of even this final consolation.

Drawn to the only heat remaining in the cave, the serpents washed up against the foot of the boulder upon which the two friends waited in a restless sea of scales, and the largest amongst them reared up from the press of the others questing for purchase. Paul leaned back and closed his eyes, instantly conjuring the familiar vision of Vanda dancing naked but for her Gypsy jewelry beneath a bright, pitiless moon, though this time there lay at her feet the prostrate victims of foreign and merciless gods. ●

BLOG BYTES (continued from p. 86): *Six Word Stories* is exactly what it says, a place where six-word stories are published. You can read the stories that are posted on the site, and you might even be inspired to try your hand at writing one. There's no payment, and the editorial criteria are as simple as the concept: "Stories SJ finds appealing for whatever idiosyncratic reason will be posted. . . ."

If you're interested in writing something longer than six words, a novel, for example, JA Konrath has some advice for you at *A Newbie's Guide to Publishing* (**http://jakonrath.blogspot.com**). Konrath is the author of the Lt. Jacqueline "Jack" Daniels series and numerous articles and stories, and while you might not agree with everything he has to say (don't worry; nobody does), you're sure to find it interesting. Whether he's discussing "The Art of the Soft Sell" or whether a writer should charge for appearances, Konrath keeps things lively.

Writers don't always use their blogs to write about writing. Some use their experiences to comment on other kinds of things. A good example is Barry Eisler, who writes a series about professional assassin John Rain. Eisler's blog is *The Heart of the Matter* (**http://www.barryeisler.com/blog.html**), where Eisler talks about what's going on in the world, like the possibility of war with Iran, the ethics of torture, or what's happening in Iraq. Eisler's experiences (he once held a covert position with the CIA's Directorate of Operations, for example) give him a unique perspective.

For Bill Crider's own blog visit **http://billcrider.blogspot.com**. ●

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Safe and Loft

by John Lutz

Rose had mud on her nose.

Not a lot, but enough to arouse suspicion. Laker considered telling her about it, but that would be foolish. Instead he pretended to admire the green and yellow tie with the staring-eye pattern.

"Nice," he said, fondling the tie.

Rose was alarmed. This customer was in his thirties, handsome, with blue eyes and wavy dark hair, and a sort of amused grin that was probably always on his face. His suit was okay, a kind of wrinkled gray blend with a fair amount of wool in it, that had never been touched by a tailor. What alarmed Rose was that he couldn't really *like* the tie. And that he seemed so confident, as if he had some big secret.

Rose told herself, so what, everybody has a big secret. Rose was like that.

"Have I got it right," asked the customer, "all you sell here are ties?"

Together, he and Rose glanced around the tiny downtown shop with its claustrophobically low ceiling and crowded racks of ties. "Not much room to sell anything else," she said.

She waited, but he didn't mention that they were the ugliest ties imaginable. Massed as they were, they were a visual assault. Some of them actually hurt the eye

"You want the tie?" Rose asked from behind the counter.

"Sure."

He dug five ten-dollar bills from his wallet and paid her, watching her tuck the money into the register.

"No change?" he asked.

"Fifty even," Rose said. "Tax included."

"A bargain," said the guy, through his amused smile.

Rose carefully folded the hideous thing and placed it in a bag.

"No receipt?"

An Edgar Allan Poe Award winner, a multiple Shamus Award winner, and a recipient of the PWA's Lifetime Achievement Award, John Lutz is one of the most esteemed writers in the field. He's the author of dozens of novels and some two hundred published short stories. His latest thriller, *In for the Kill*, was published as a paperback original by Pinnacle Books in '07. †

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"You've got the tie," she told him with her own smile.

"Good point." He thanked her before she could thank him, then went to the door and opened it, causing the tiny bell above it to tinkle as if sounding a faint alarm. "I'll tell my friends," he said, before going back out onto the busy sidewalk.

Rose said for him to be sure to do that, then went behind the curtain to the back room and down the crude wooden steps to where the digging was being done. "I sold a tie," she said dejectedly.

Donna and Corrine stopped digging. Even dirty, Donna, with her lush, long red hair and big green eyes, looked like a beauty-pageant contestant. Corinne had blond hair, a heart-shaped face, and was attractive, but looked too delicate to be in any kind of contest. Her shovel was smaller than Donna's. Somehow she hadn't gotten dirty. All three women were the same age—twenty-one—and attended Pierpont University, but the semester had ended and they weren't going to classes, so they were working on a summer project. They were robbing a bank.

Specifically, the one directly across the street from the Tie One On Shop, which they'd bought six weeks ago from an eager owner who'd retired to Florida. It had been a small jewelry shop, but the bank robbers had converted it to a tie shop and stocked it with the least appealing merchandise possible, and generally did what they could to discourage customers. They wanted to concentrate on their digging.

The tunnel, which had progressed to about halfway, would run beneath Ninth Avenue, and then beneath the vault of Sixth National Bank, where the plan was for it to make an abrupt upward turn.

"It was bound to happen," Donna said, removing a work glove and fluffing her hair, done just yesterday by Evander, who wasn't cheap, "that someone would buy a tie."

"There was *something* about the guy who bought it, though," Rose said. She didn't look like any kind of beauty contestant. She was short, wiry, had mouse-colored, naturally spiky hair and fierce brown eyes above a turned-up nose. If she'd been born a dog, she'd have been one of those small breeds that strain to wriggle into tunnels to fight and kill burrowing vermin. A good ratter.

"Did he look like a cop?" Corrine asked, her eyes pie-plate wide.

Rose thought about it. "Not honest enough. He looked like he secretly hated the tie, which is something to be said for him."

"He was cute," Donna said. "I can tell by the way you describe him."

"Cute and dangerous," Rose said.

"Your type," Donna said.

Rose didn't argue.

"Selling ties is part of the plan," Corrine said. "We *are* in business."

That was a laugh, because the three of them were from incredibly wealthy families, which was why they could afford a snooty school like Pierpont. They were of an age and nature to resent their wealth and hate their dependence on those families. To rebel. Not

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uncommon. There were all sorts of ways for young women such as they to revolt and act out; anti-this, anti-that. It seemed to Rose that most of it had all been done. So she'd convinced Donna and Corrine to set aside their causes (No World Dominion, and Alternatives to Eggs) and, with her, rob a bank. It had nothing to do with money. It was exactly the sort of thing people *without* money did. That was the point. Also, who would suspect them, since their families were fabulously wealthy?

No one, that's who.

All three agreed that it was a neat thing to do, so here they were, tunneling beneath Ninth Avenue. Each evening Rose would take the subway to where their innocuous-looking gray truck was parked, drive it to the tie shop, then back the vehicle in tight to the rear door for deliveries. Only the truck wasn't there to make deliveries; it was there to pick up dirt, which was later dumped in New Jersey, which, being the Garden State, could always use dirt.

"It's not a catastrophe that we sold a tie," Corrine said brightly.

"That tie," Rose said, "is a catastrophe."

"So what're we gonna do?" Donna asked, leaning fetchingly on her pickax.

Rose worked her hands into her gloves and picked up a shovel. "We're gonna dig."

It was hard work, digging. No one here had ever before developed a callus, though Corrine had once had a humongous blister after a strenuous tennis session. Now all three young women had hardened calluses on their hands, even though they wore gloves. They'd been digging for almost a month.

Easy to imagine their disappointment and near panic when they stopped digging for the day, switched off the lights they'd strung in the tunnel, and climbed back up into the tie shop to wash up in the half-bath and leave—and encountered three uniformed cops.

Rose was as alarmed as the others, but she sensed immediately that there was something out of kilter here. Something not right with what was wrong.

These cops were lounging around where they were bound to be seen when the diggers emerged, because they'd opened the curtain to the back room. One was seated on the counter near the register, another slouched on the floor, and the third was leaning against a wall near a tie display with the casual but watchful attitude of someone waiting for a bus. The leaning one was the man who'd earlier that day purchased the yellow and green tie with the staring-eye pattern.

Scary, Rose thought. Lots of blue uniform, glistening black leather, shiny silver badges. And they were pointing their guns at the bank robbers.

"Holy smokes!" Donna said.

"Oh, wow, no!" cried Corrine.

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"I didn't think you looked honest enough to be a cop," Rose said to the one who'd bought the tie.

"Well, you've got me there," he said, with his irritating smile. He straightened up away from the wall in a way that made him appear to have been stuck to it. "My name's Laker." He motioned backhanded toward the cop on the counter. "Officer Fink."

Fink smiled and nodded. He was a pink-eyed, skinny guy with hair redder than Donna's.

"And Officer Andrepinino."

Andrepinino had classic Latin good looks, only his nose was way too long and had a bump in it. He also smiled and nodded.

"Are you going to read us our rights?" Donna asked Fink, since he was the only other natural redhead.

The three cops glanced at each other, then returned their guns to their holsters.

Oh-oh, Rose thought. *Here we go.*

"We're with the Six-Ten Precinct, the Safe and Loft unit," Laker said.

"You guys are one unit?" Corrine asked.

"You wouldn't know it to look at us," Laker said, "but we are. We've had you ladies under observation for the past several weeks and couldn't help but notice you've set about robbing the bank across the street."

"Oh," Donna said, "that one." She smiled at Fink, who cocked his head sideways and stared mesmerized at her.

"It's our job," Laker said, "to arrest you."

"Our duty," Fink said.

"But you're not going to," Rose said.

"Bingo," Fink said, still looking at Donna as if maybe he was going to beg for a treat.

"We've researched you three ladies," Laker said. "We know your names and backgrounds."

"Very wealthy ladies," Andrepinino said.

"He speaks," Rose said.

"But not to our superior officers or the district attorney," Laker said. "Not yet. Same goes for Fink and me. Nobody knows about you and your plans except the six of us."

"Are we going to have to choose between jail or a fate worse than death?" Donna asked, looking at Fink as if she'd already chosen.

"Don't misunderstand, ladies," Laker said. "This isn't about choosing. We're here to kidnap you."

"Grand," Rose said.

"Think about it," Laker said. "It's not a bad idea. You aren't about to rob Sixth National for the money; you are what we on the force call rebellious youth—among other things. So what you're going to do, instead of fifteen to twenty for attempted bank robbery, is cooperate in your kidnapping and help us hold up your wealthy par-

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ents. Assuming they'll pay the ransoms, which we'll split with you. Rich people like you surely have abduction insurance, so your folks will be reimbursed for the ransom money, which means nobody gets hurt even financially."

"I never heard of abduction insurance," Rose said.

"You don't attend Pierpont University without it," Laker told her.

"Oh."

"We're going to take you from here to a nice place out in the country, where one of us will stay with you all the time. We know you ladies are used to luxuries. You'll have TV and magazines to read, good food and drink—everything but a phone. You'll play along with the ransom demands and provide proof that you're still alive, and you'll talk your families into not contacting the authorities. I suspect all three of you are good at talking people into things."

"And out of," Donna said.

Andrepinino shook his head. "Not us, though."

No one said anything for a long time.

"That's it?" Rose finally asked.

Laker nodded. "It. And miles safer than robbing a bank."

Rose looked at Corrine, who looked at Donna, who looked at Fink.

"I like it," Rose said. Donna nodded. Corrine looked prettily concerned, then also nodded.

Laker smiled. This was going nicely. "You will now accompany us to our SUV parked outside. It seats eight, six comfortably, and the windows and locks are controlled from the driver's seat."

"You're not arresting us," Donna said, "but we're still your prisoners."

"Definitely," Fink said.

"Um," Donna said.

"What about clothes?" Corrine asked. "And cosmetics?"

"You can give us a shopping list," Laker said.

The three hostages smiled at the word *shopping.*

"You boys have thought of everything," Rose said.

"Nobody thinks of everything," Laker said, "or it would be a boring world."

Rose found herself beginning to like him.

Two hours later the six collaborators were secured in a rambling log hunting lodge in a remote spot near a remote lake in a remote forest. The windows had been boarded up and the doors secured by dead-bolt locks that could only be opened with keys. The cops were seated in leather armchairs in a room whose paneled walls were festooned with antlers. Their willing victims were visible at the other end of the vast room, seated at a round oak table and working on shopping lists. They seemed to be having a good time.

"You sure nobody'll show up at this place?" Andrepinino asked.

"It's only used in the winter during deer season," Laker said. He

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stood up from his comfortable chair and listened to the sigh of air from the cushion. When this was over, maybe he'd buy a chair just like it. "You take first shift keeping an eye on our collaborators," he said to Andrepinino.

Andrepinino nodded. "I'll cook up some dinner for us. I doubt any of those ladies can cook."

"They know how to order from a menu," Laker said. "That's about it."

"You two wanna hang around and eat with the ladies and me?" Andrepinino asked. "I think I'll do something with eggplant."

"Sounds good, but we're going to be busy."

"Making those ransom calls?"

"We can do that tomorrow," Laker said.

Andrepinino raised his eyebrows. "Then what *are* you gonna do?"

"We're going to dig," Laker said.

"Dig deep as you have to," J. Herbert Knifer, president, chairman, and CEO of Knifer Consolidated Industries, said to his chief of security, Otto Lugar. "Find the scum who snatched my daughter. No one—" he pointed an ominous finger at Lugar—"and I mean *no one,* takes something that belongs to J. Herbert Knifer."

"Or Knifer Consolidated Industries," Lugar added, with the wisdom that had garnered him the fast track to promotion.

Knifer smiled, but grimly. He was a short man who seemed tall, with craggy gray eyebrows, piercing dark eyes, and a nose like a hatchet blade. Rose had fortunately inherited most of her mother's good looks. Her mother had been discarded not long after Rose's birth, when it was discovered that she could bear no more children. If you didn't produce, you were of no lasting interest to Knifer. Lugar knew that.

"Remember," Knifer said, from behind the half-acre marble surface of his desk, "the authorities must not be involved. If anything happened to Rose because we disobeyed the kidnappers' instructions and contacted the police . . . well, I'd never be able to reimburse myself."

"I have confidential connections not involving the police," Lugar said. Though he looked like a thug, with his bull shoulders, bald head, and formidable slash of a mouth, he was smart and reasonably sophisticated. And not to be trusted, which was what Knifer liked about him. Lugar would sell out to the highest bidder, but that was Knifer. So Lugar could be controlled, which wasn't exactly like trust, but close enough.

Lugar stood up from his chair, which was an impressive sight, because he was six and a half feet tall. "I'll head a small, select team that knows how to keep a secret."

"Imperative."

"We'll give the recording of the ransom call to our own laboratories. Our sound analysis should give us something to work on, and once

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we have that, the outcome isn't in doubt. You'll have your daughter Rose back, sir, and you won't have paid a cent in ransom money." He knew Knifer expected that outcome, but one out of two would be enough to preserve Lugar's employment, if it was the right one.

"Keep it confidential," Knifer said.

"Done," Lugar said.

"It better be."

"Another few days and we'll be there," Laker said, hoisting a shovelful of dirt.

"I gotta say," Fink said, staying bent low so as not to bump his head on the tunnel roof, "this is working out better than I thought it would. The families are mulling it over, but there's no sign they've contacted the authorities."

"They'll pay," Laker said confidently. "Because they're worth so much they won't even miss the money."

"The girls are okay, too," Fink said. "They're being very cooperative."

"That Corrine's a honey," Laker said. "And some cook."

"Andrepinino kind of likes her," Fink said. He added, "Donna's a beauty, doesn't need to know how to cook."

"And Rose—"

"Is never gonna be happy," Fink said, interrupting.

"Never," Laker agreed.

But in truth, he wasn't so sure. Rose had been close to being happy when she beat him at checkers during his shift as guard at the lodge. Not like when it became apparent she was going to lose and she'd upset the board. What she did mostly was scribble with a pen in what she called her novel, a thick spiral notebook. Laker figured that was okay; it would keep her out of trouble. She was an English major, and whether she knew it or not, the notebook wasn't going anyplace.

Fink dragged a sweaty forearm across his brow and adjusted the "Nixon's the One" tie he had wrapped around his head to keep perspiration out of his eyes. "We're gonna be under the vault in a few days, and we might need some kind of cutting torch to get through the steel floor."

"We can afford to buy one," Laker told him. "One way or the other, and maybe both ways, we're about to get rich."

"The ransom deadline's past on all three of them," Andrepinino said two days later when they were almost directly beneath the vault floor. "We're not going to get rich that way. I hate to tell Corrine. She's gonna be awfully disappointed."

"All three of them will be," Laker said.

"I think Rose kind of expected it," Andrepinino said. "She's sort of steely beneath the surface."

"Not far beneath," Laker said.

How Rose had acted was to withdraw, curl up, and scribble like

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mad in her notebook novel. Laker would have to read it someday, before it was burned.

"So what're we gonna do now?" Andrepinino asked, putting down his shovel. He was wearing the Nixon tie for a headband. He kind of liked it and had bought it from Fink, who'd assured him it only needed dry cleaning and would be good for at least three or four more years. When this was over, he'd wear it for a souvenir. At least that had been the plan. "I mean, we threatened to kill them if the ransom wasn't paid."

"It's awkward," Laker admitted.

The three kidnap victims were well aware of the deadline being past; they'd helped with the ominous phone demands, pretending to plead for their lives. Andrepinino thought Corrine had really put her heart into it. Not just cute, but some little actress.

"Any ideas?" Andrepinino asked.

Laker peeled off his leather work gloves. "We better go out and buy that cutting torch."

When they'd cleaned up and returned to the lodge, they found Fink and the hostages sitting around the living room watching TV news and sipping apple martinis. No one looked particularly in angst.

Laker sighed. "I guess we all know the ransom deadline is past," he said solemnly.

"Forget about that," Rose said, making a careless motion with her hand. "It's not as if you've never broken a promise."

Laker didn't contradict her.

"This is the way it's going to be," Rose said. She motioned toward the easy chairs angled toward the sofa, then used the remote to switch off the TV. "Sit down."

Laker and Andrepinino stared at her.

She took a sip of her martini and stared back.

Laker and Andrepinino sat.

"Look at you two," Rose said from the sofa. "You've got dirt all over you, including your muddy thinking."

"They figured out about the digging," Fink explained from where he sat beside Donna. He might have been slightly drunk from the martinis.

Corrine said, "Duh!"

Andrepinino lowered his head. "I guess this isn't working out the way we planned."

"Don't feel so bad," Corrine said soothingly. She reached over and squeezed his hand.

"We're not going anywhere," Rose said. "Not yet, anyway."

"They'll think we killed you," Andrepinino said. "They'll never stop searching for us."

"He'sh right," Fink said, sloshing martini and resting his head on Donna's shoulder.

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"Stop feeling sorry for yourselves," Rose said. "When we eventually turn up alive, the heat will be off. There might not be any ransom money, but we still have the bank."

"I like the way you think," Laker said.

"Are you nitwits under the vault yet?" Rose asked.

"Less than another day's digging," Laker said. "And we bought a torch to cut through the floor."

"Hey! Initiative."

"There'sh no need to be shmart," Fink said.

"Good thing for you three there's some truth to that." Rose crossed her legs at the knees, not liking the way Laker was staring at them. "When we get the money from the bank, we split it six ways, then you guys go back to your insignificant lives, and the three of us will say the kidnap thing was all a girlish lark and return to our loving families. We'll say we were in Belize or someplace like that."

"What do you get out of it?" Laker asked. "You don't need the money."

"Not so. We'd all like to be financially independent of the people who wouldn't pay ransom for our release. Can you blame us for that?"

Laker couldn't. "What'll happen to you when you go back?"

"I'll sweet-talk my way out of any trouble," Donna said.

"I'll tell off my father, then spin on my heel and walk out," Rose said.

Corrine said, "I'm sure I'll be grounded for at least a week."

"Ugh!" Donna said.

Laker thought this would probably work.

Lugar had called the meeting with the security chiefs of the other two companies involved in the ransom demands, that of Donna's father, Rapacious Conglom, and of Corrine's father, Eminent Domain, Inc. They were in the offices of Knifer Consolidated on the fortieth floor of the Knifer Building, all seated at one end of a long conference table of polished inlaid woods.

The other two security chiefs listened carefully to what Lugar had to say. He began with: "The time has come for us to join forces."

"Which means sharing information," Vasteen of Rapacious said. He was an impeccably groomed man the size of a Humvee. His bulk, along with his scarred face and dark scowl, made his expensive chalk-stripe suit look like tailored prison garb. He glanced around. "Agreed?"

"That's why I called the meeting," Lugar said. "The kidnappers didn't get what they asked for, but they might try again. There's a chance they haven't killed the abductees yet; they're still potentially valuable. But whether the abductees are alive or dead, we have to find the kidnappers, or our own life expectancies will be shortened."

Smith of Eminent, a smallish man, also well tailored, nodded his bald head in agreement. He had strangely reptilian features, perhaps because of his protruding brown eyes, which were without

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lashes or brows. They blinked infrequently, but when they did, it seemed an event. "We share. And when we act, we act together."

"That only makes sense," Lugar said.

No one disagreed, though no one here trusted anyone else. What bonded them was their mutual interest, and the certainty that any one of them would kill any other if double-crossed. They were comfortable with the arrangement; it worked for countries.

Since the pooling of resources was his idea, Lugar spilled what he'd learned first. It wasn't much.

Smith followed, then Vasteen.

When all three men were finished talking, they sat silently. It seemed they hadn't made any progress, but they couldn't be sure. Not yet. They sat for several moments, mulling over what they'd just heard, before Vasteen looked at Smith. "You said one of your men talked to a student at Pierpont who mentioned giving Corinne a lift one day to a tie shop."

Smith nodded. "It wasn't either of the other two abductees."

"But a tie shop," Lugar said. "What's a college girl doing at a tie shop?"

Smith shrugged. "Buying a tie for her boyfriend?"

"Or maybe her father," Lugar said. All three men laughed.

"Why I ask about it," Vasteen said, "is one of my people tracking whoever the abductee talked with during the past several months traced one of her phone conversations to Sarasota, Florida. A retired guy in his seventies."

"What might they have been talking about?" Lugar asked.

"I don't know," Vasteen said, "but we checked him out, and what I remember about him is that he recently moved south after selling his jewelry store to someone who wanted to open a tie shop."

The three security chiefs looked at each other silently. Then they smiled and absently fingered their silk tie knots, which suddenly didn't seem so tight.

The captors and captives, or six co-conspirators, had a blueberry pancake and bacon breakfast at the lodge, then drove into the city in the SUV.

It was time to go to work.

The acetylene torch was in the back of the SUV, where it would stay until the last of the digging was done, which, Laker estimated, would be early this evening. By tomorrow, they should all be rich. Well, some of them *richer,* and in an independent if illegal way.

After parking the vehicle behind the tie shop, they walked around front and went inside.

The place was hot, musty, and confining, almost as much so as the tunnel itself. Laker led the way into the back room and down into the tunnel. He was followed by Andrepinino, the three women, and then Fink. Five feet in, Laker switched on the string of lights.

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Rose liked what she saw. The tunnel was ninety percent finished, and had been made higher and widened.

Suddenly Andrepinino stopped in front of her. The whole chain of co-conspirators stopped.

"What's going on?" Rose asked, getting a sinking feeling. Her father. She just knew it. He wasn't often outwitted.

"The tools," Laker said. "We left them lined up here, and they're gone."

"Come the rest of the way in," a deep voice said. "We've gathered up your toys and put them all in one place. You're finished playing with them."

Laker's mind began to whirl, trying to get hold of and assess what was happening. Not having much luck. Nothing to do but continue his hunched-over walk toward the area beneath the vault. Behind him, the rest of the train began to move.

Two large men were waiting for them, guns drawn. Laker knew at a glance they weren't cops. They were in suit pants and expensive shoes, ties loosened, shirt sleeves rolled so they weren't so warm. One of them had on a Rolex, the other a big diamond ring. Behind them the shovels and pickaxes were stacked in a neat pile.

Fink wasn't last in. He was followed by another man in dress slacks with his sleeves rolled up, and carrying a handgun. This one was smaller than the other two, but somehow just as dangerous looking.

Laker was certain these weren't the dads. They all looked like well-dressed thugs.

"Rose Knifer," said one of the big ones, who had eyes like ice, "I work for your father." Rose knew he was telling the truth; she'd seen him once before, remembered those eyes, thought his name was Lugar.

"You three guys," said the small one, who had a head like a snake's, "get over there in a bunch so we can keep an eye on you." He gave Fink a shove. "And stay away from these girls."

"Hey, wait a minute," Donna said.

"Back off!" Fink said when he was given a second shove.

Laker raised a hand. "Don't say anything. These aren't cops."

"We're security, punk," said one of the big ones, waving his gun at Laker as a signal to move. "Get with the other two losers."

The big one with the icy eyes smiled. "The cops aren't coming. Remember, you insisted the authorities not be involved. We're going to deliver you to our employers. The next time you meet the police, it'll be in some country you never heard of, and they won't be gentle."

"Thank God you're here," Rose said.

Everyone looked at her. She stepped over and gave the surprised Ice-eyes a hug. Then she moved back along the tunnel, toward the tie shop.

"Where you going?" asked Little-and-dangerous. But he didn't aim his gun her way.

"To phone my father and tell him I'm safe. My cell phone won't

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work in this tunnel."

"Ro—Miss Knifer," Ice-eyes said. "You don't need—"

"You mean you're *forbidding* me to phone my father?" She fixed her own glassy stare on him, one that matched his and then some. Her eyes were so like her father's. "What would he think if I was only trading one set of captors and bullies for another?"

"Okay," he said reluctantly. "Go ahead and phone. Then come right back here."

She continued to stare.

"Please," he added. He glanced at his two companions. "It won't hurt anything; we're going to phone them anyway."

"I like doing it in our own good time," said Little-and-dangerous.

"It doesn't matter," said the other big man. "We've got what we want."

Everyone stood silently, sweating, until Rose returned. When she did, she was carrying a wrinkled paper sack and smiling. She gave Laker a glance. "It's all right now," she said. "I called the police."

As she spoke, her back to the three security men, she withdrew from the sack three nine-millimeter, semiautomatic handguns she'd gotten from the jackets of Laker, Andrepinino, and Fink, left behind the counter in the tie shop. It took her only a few seconds to hand them out to their grateful owners.

Stunned, everyone but the three women pointed a gun at someone. The situation was, in a precarious way, neutralized.

"I don't get it, Miss Knifer," Ice-eyes said. His gun was aimed at Laker.

"I think I do," Laker said. He'd come to know Rose well enough to figure it out. She smiled her appreciation. "My partners and I got a tip that someone might be tunneling into the bank, and we've had this tie shop staked out for weeks. You three—" he nodded at Lugar and the other two security chiefs—"are under arrest for attempted bank robbery."

Security looked collectively astounded. "You're *cops?*" sputtered Little-and-dangerous.

Fink, who carried his shield in his hip pocket, removed it and flashed it at the three men.

Lugar looked imploringly at Rose. "Miss Knifer!"

"Oh, I'm not here," she said. "This is strictly a guy thing."

And she led Donna and Corinne from the tunnel.

A few minutes later came the muted wails of sirens. They might have been in the street right above.

"This isn't going to fly," Lugar said.

"We always worked with gloves on," Laker said. "Your fingerprints are all over the tools you gathered up. And, of course, there's the strongest evidence."

"Which is?"

"You're here, in a tunnel, beneath the vault of Sixth National Bank."

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There was noise from the mouth of the tunnel, voices. The cops had arrived.

The other cops.

"I advise you to drop your weapons," Laker said. "It might be dangerous to hold on to them."

The three security chiefs had no choice but to obey. They were all staring at Laker in a way that made him queasy even though he held all the high cards.

"Anything you say can be held against you," he said.

"And won't be believed," Fink added.

And it wasn't believed. Because Rose, Donna, Corinne, Laker, Andrepinino, and Fink testified otherwise.

The three security chiefs were convicted of attempted bank robbery and sentenced to twenty years in prison. Their respective employers made it clear that they were safer inside the walls than out.

Donna stamped her foot, Corrine cried, and their families forgave them for their kidnap prank and secret trip to Belize.

Rose never really convinced her father there wasn't more to what happened than he knew, but he knew better than to try to pry more information out of her. Besides, everything had turned out all right. Nothing had been lost but an incompetent and disloyal chief of security.

Laker, Andrepinino, and Fink received commendations.

Corrine and Andrepinino began dating. As did Donna and Fink. But they were the kinds of relationships that devolved to warm friendships and nothing more.

Not so with Laker and Rose.

One morning, when they were lying side by side in bed in their resort hotel room in Belize, Rose proposed marriage. After all, she was independently wealthy, now that her novel, *Dirt, Love, and Money,* was on all the bestseller lists. No one suspected it was fact rather than fiction.

Well, almost no one.

"I can't promise I'll go straight," Laker said candidly. "You wouldn't want a husband in prison."

She laughed. "Silly! You can be legal and not go straight."

Still, he hesitated. "I don't know if it'll work, Rose. We'll always have that bank job between us."

"I'll tell you something Donna and Corinne never knew," she said. "My father owns Sixth National Bank." She laughed. "If you want, I can see that you become bank president."

Laker lay back on the bed and laughed with her, thinking of what he could do with a whole bank.

What *they* could do, he and his new bride.

Funny the way things can fall into place, he thought. It's all so easy when the author is on your side. ●

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DIRT

by Kate Barsotti

It is curious that the leaf should so love the light and the root so hate it.
Celia Thaxter, *An Island Garden*

Maxwell Rimmer gazed through the warped glass of old window-panes, letting his eyes settle on rain-cloud washiness and green-leaved wet. It was ridiculous, this weather. An early spring tempest with ambitions to be a full-fledged cyclone had, instead, lowered its expectations and become a persistent storm. It spun in place off the New Hampshire and Maine coasts, near the Isles of the Shoals, too strong to blow itself out and too weak to return to the sea. TV weather-persons waned from jocular to worried to apologetic, as if the storm were a delinquent child that no one could control. Rimmer half believed it was.

Under the persistent rapping of rain on his roof, he sipped his morning coffee to the voice of Reverend Ansel Peach on the Christian radio station W-EVE. Reverend Peach spoke of God's judgment, of signs and revelations: "Verily, I say unto thee, woe to the man who repenteth not, for God will drown his disgrace in a flood of judgment. Sin not. That is the word of our Lord."

Repentance, evidently, was the remedy to rain. Rimmer liked Preacher Peach's voice, steady as drops on the eaves. He was pleased that the sermons rarely made much sense, but were stern

Kate Barsotti is an illustrator and non-fiction writer who lives in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. The inspiration for her story "Dirt," her first fiction sale, was her own garden, which she describes as a Midwestern "weed crop" that she attempted to turn into a butterfly nursery. While doing her best to learn the intricacies of composting, she says, she was sidetracked by garden philosophers, and thus, her story's Maxwell Rimmer was born.

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and comforting in a King Jamesian sort of way. The reverend's voice was pure, unsullied by doubt, he was only slightly surprised at the stupidity of his listeners, who seemed determined to head straight to hell. For each continuous day of wet, Rimmer sent a donation to the ministry, a check for exactly one dollar. It was the least he could do, since the minister's predictions of the next great flood seemed to be correct. Rimmer's bank account was less thirty-seven dollars and counting.

It was becoming personal, this rain. While Rimmer pitied his few neighbors with cesspool cellars and dripping ceilings, his problem was lack of inspiration. Over the past forty years, Rimmer had built a voracious following of amateur green thumbs who gobbled his weekly columns, devoured his books, and sucked in his interviews as if their Wild Blue Yonder roses depended on it. He didn't solve problems such as root rot or blight. Discussion of compost or organic weed control was beneath him. Sheltered on Appledore Island, Maxwell Rimmer was the poet of the garden, the sensitive soul who appreciated the inner lives of pansies and the arousal of bees in the honeycomb. He was not looking for backyard converts (weedies, he called them). Rimmer was happy to continue preaching to his choir, devoted gardeners who wrote fan letters with dip pens in calligraphic hand, pressing flowers between the pages. Sometimes they sent knitted mittens, although Rimmer never quite understood why, but he always instructed his agent's secretary to send a thank-you note, along with a notice about his upcoming book.

If there ever were another book. No words flowed. He knew that he'd been petering out the last few years. What more could he write about daisies? The damper it became outside, the more dried up Rimmer felt within, his brain parched as a lake bed cracked by drought. He stayed indoors. He nodded off in his chair and woke himself with his own snorts. His only real activity was to listen to Reverend Peach every morning. Much to his chagrin, he'd begun to take notes.

He let his eyes wander from the window to the wall. He stared at a framed print of a painting that depicted a woman in her island garden. The woman was none other than Celia Thaxter, who had lived on Appledore, created a lovely garden, and was famous in her day for writing about it. Rimmer's agent had sent the picture as a gift when his first book was published. She said that his living on Appledore, which naturally associated his work with Thaxter's book *An Island Garden,* added to Rimmer's mystique.

"Like, you know," Tina said over the phone, snapping her gum in his ear, "like your pages and hers are having a nice garden chat, from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first. Maxwell? . . . Hello?"

Rimmer neglected to tell his agent about Thaxter's associations with things other than flowers. Murder, for instance. Thaxter had written an essay called "A Memorable Murder" about the gruesome

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deaths on Smuttynose Island, a spit of land near Appledore. The murders occurred in 1873. Thaxter's essay was full of romantic nonsense, but Rimmer admired the prose with which she described the tale of woe:

> Louis Wagner murdered Anethe and Karen Christensen at midnight on the 5th of March, two years ago this spring. The whole affair shows the calmness of a practiced hand; there was no malice in the deed, no heat; it was one of the coolest instances of deliberation ever chronicled in the annals of crime. He admits that these people had shown him nothing but kindness. He says in so many words, "They were my best friends." They looked upon him as a brother. Yet he did not hesitate to murder them.

Louis Wagner had rowed to Smuttynose on a cold, still night. The island was still encased in ice and snow. Wagner knew that the other men were out fishing. He also knew that they'd recently been paid, and he wanted to visit their homes and steal the money. Three women were asleep in the Christensen cottage, unprotected. Wagner felled Anethe with an axe and strangled Karen, but the third woman escaped. Wagner was captured, tried, and jailed. He admitted no guilt and expressed no regret.

And Celia Thaxter got her essay, Rimmer thought, peeved. Easy enough for her. She was a flowery woman in a flowery age. She was even famous for her *poetry,* for God's sake. If such a murder happened on one of the Isles today, who would notice? It would be a blurb one day and a footnote the next, and might get a full minute on local news. Rimmer couldn't even expect a newspaper byline, unless by some feat of divine intervention, the *New Yorker* called.

Rimmer raised his fingers to his typewriter, a sturdy Olympia with a working bell that dinged at the end of each line. He laid his fingertips on the keys, set his jaw, and tapped in time to the rain:

Of all Nature's growing things, herbs are the most innocent. While some may sneak out of their quarters and propagate willy-nilly in flower bowers or vegetable beds, this spreading of seed is mere exuberance, not opportunistic lust.

He gnashed his teeth and crumpled the paper in his fist. "Lovely. Maxwell Rimmer, garden pornographer."

He left the paper in a creased ball and placed it on the corner of his desk beside the other castoffs. They'd been accumulating for a month. One of them might contain the germ of an idea. He would need his stockpile of sentences to nourish it along.

The sound of a flapping rug grated on his ears. Rimmer shoved himself up from the desk and stomped to the back door.

"Must you?"

Elsa's chapped hands snapped the rug in the air, sending dust

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and debris flying to settle in nearby puddles. Wattles of flesh under her arms flapped, too, but her thighs and buttocks held firm under the cotton dress.

Nice hams, sweet gams. The thought bubbled up in Rimmer's mind unbidden. He swatted it away.

"I said, must you? I'm writing."

Elsa faced him. "You better outside."

Rimmer's eyes skittered away from hers. He found it impossible to meet her gaze. For one thing, her irises were too blue. For another, her age was unfathomable. She could be a worn-out forty-something or a well-preserved sixtyish.

"I've told you a thousand times. I need quiet."

She folded the rug on her arm like a maître d'. She looked as if she expected to escort him outside and send him under the sodden arbor. "You need garden," she said and brushed past him into the house. He stayed in the doorway and watched her firm calves disappear into the kitchen.

Elsa had appeared on his doorstep three years ago, after her former employer and Rimmer's nearest neighbor keeled over at supper. The old man had bubbled his last breaths facedown in a bowl of pea soup.

Ba-bam. Ba-bam.

Rimmer remembered her knock as a terrible summons given with the force of law. He'd rushed to the door. A stout woman had commandeered his doorstep, holding two suitcases.

"McKintey dead," she announced in a thick Dutch accent.

"S-sorry?" Rimmer stammered, blushing. He hadn't seen the old coot in years and figured he was already gone. The housekeeper's proclamation made McKintey's recent passing seem anticlimactic. Bad manners, even.

Elsa looked Rimmer up and down, scowling. He'd rushed to the door wearing his writing garb: a new sunscreen hat; an apron with sturdy pockets for trowels and forks; kneepads; and spotless galoshes. They helped Rimmer get into the mood to compose and, besides, the corporations that provided them for free were desperate for his endorsement. Elsa sniffed.

"I clean now," she said. She strode in with her suitcases and forced him to step aside. She found the guest bedroom, where no guest had ever stayed, and unpacked. Rimmer slunk back to his desk, minus the garden accessories that he squirreled away in a closet. He sulked for a day, prepared to send her off on the next boat. She wasn't his responsibility. But she'd managed to clean the kitchen, cook a sublime meal of potatoes and meatballs, and then make the kitchen sparkling again before going off to bed. Her English was too limited to negotiate more than room and board, plus a small allowance. Rimmer wallowed in smugness. He dismissed the maid service that came once a month and prepared to live like an exiled king.

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They butted heads over the garden. Elsa pestered him about doing his own planting and pruning. Said it would be good for him. Rimmer dug in. He'd hired out that sort of thing. Why would he tend his garden any more than he cleaned his toilet? He was an artist, not a laborer. Genius required cultivation. Let her mumble Dutch in the kitchen. Let Mexican Spanish be chattered in the hedgerows. Let their fingernails stay split and soiled. His readers needed him.

At least, they used to. Closing the back door against the rain, Rimmer sat down heavily at his desk and sighed. One eye squeezed out a tear. His early books were out of print. When the phone rang, it was a garden society, not a national magazine. His own agent had been hinting for some months that, if a great work were not forthcoming, perhaps Rimmer should consider appearances at state fairs. Farmers markets. Girl Scout troops. She even mentioned something about a blog. Rimmer despaired. Appledore Island didn't even have roads.

His chest ached with dormant feelings. *I'm root-bound. Withering.* He plucked one of his crumpled-up papers off his desk and unfolded it.

Words were missing.

Rimmer flattened the page. Entire phrases had been cut out, leaving rectangular holes all over the paper. He grabbed another crumpled ball. It, too, had been vandalized by somebody's scissors. He snatched each one and tore it open; they were all ravaged. Finally, Rimmer noticed unwrinkled sheets at the bottom of the pile.

The cut-out phrases composed the text, taped down to form paragraphs. His words, made new again, by careful arrangement. Trite phrases and stale observations had been left behind. Some benevolent elf had come in the night, read his poor draft, and lifted the gold from the dross. A gift. Rimmer gasped and put a hand against his breastbone.

He stumbled outside, expecting the sun to be beaming. Instead, raindrops streamed down his hair and face, trickled under his collar. Rimmer wiped his cheeks and let a laugh work its way from his belly to his lips. He felt giddy. He wanted to roll in the mud and kick his feet in the air. Instead, he picked up the garden spade that leaned against the house and worked the tip a little way into the earth. The soil squelched.

"Good, yes?" Elsa's voice.

Still grinning, Rimmer turned and said, "Yes, I suppose a little dirt might be good for me—"

She stood in the doorway, the paper with the taped scraps in her hand. She extended the paper to him, an offering. "Better now?"

His mind froze. He could feel that his face had frozen, too, stuck in a half-smile. This servant, whose mother tongue was gibberish, had tampered with his work? He should laugh it off, pour her a nice glass of scotch, and toast her health. But instead he felt, or rather,

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noticed, the way rage distilled inside his gut. She had trespassed. He watched his hands grip the handle of the spade, swing it round in a perfect arc, and crack it against her skull. She toppled forward, stiff as a post. Water rippled in the puddles, reflecting more water coming from the sky. He stepped over her body to pick up the paper and slammed the door to the house.

He came out again in a few minutes, now wearing his old writing duds—galoshes and apron and hat. He took the spade and walked to the back of the yard. The mulch bin, a large one, was covered against the rain. Some of the compost would be relatively dry, and it stunk to heaven anyway. He lifted the spade over the bin's low wall, put his shoulder against the handle, and started to dig.

The rain stopped three days later. When the phone rang early in the morning, Rimmer picked it up obediently, certain that the sheriff was calling to order him to turn himself in. Time to take his medicine.

"Maxwell? Tina. Love the new work, thanks for faxing it along. Poignant. Gripping. Just like your old stuff. Is there more? Send it on, baby, and we'll get a book out in time for next spring. . . . You there?"

Dust coated the house. Motes swam in the sunbeams. Every dish was in the sink. How had she kept stains off the floor? At night, cockroaches scuttled in the pantry and mice rustled in the walls.

Rimmer went to Elsa's room and stood by the bed. For three years, he'd never set foot inside; he'd even avoided glancing through the open door on the way to the bathroom. The cover was smooth. She'd hung a cross above the bed. The dresser held a jewelry box with a strand of pearls and rings he'd never seen her wear. He found a stack of letters in a drawer, all in Dutch. The dates were at least a decade old.

The nightstand held a lamp, a coaster for her water glass, and a small radio. Rimmer turned it on, but could barely hear its whispering. He found the volume knob and twisted.

"Welcome to W-EVE, house of the Lord on the airwaves. Coming up, it's Reverend Peach, here to offer comfort and words of redemp—"

He switched it off. Had she been here each morning, quietly listening to the same show? She could have joined him. They could have shared a cup of coffee. Talked about his writing or her errands for the day. But she had stayed in her room because she knew that he wished to be alone. Hadn't he always said so? She must have slipped out to his desk after he went to bed, to read what he had tossed away. And one night, not so long ago, she had seen his struggle with words and cleansed them.

Maxwell Rimmer shuffled out to his typewriter and sat. He heard his own breathing, but could not feel his body. It moved like a puppet. He ordered his fingers to rest upon the keys and tapped out the words: *I have lived in paradise.* ●

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An Appointment Up the Mountain

by Robert S. Levinson

Clegg stopped at Dachau before heading up the mountain.

The camp was a place he had spent years avoiding, never anxious to confront the horrors it represented to him.

Why today was different he wasn't sure.

Maybe because he had to be close on business and seeing Dachau would salve his conscience by showing him the reality of death beyond any he had caused after taking up killing as a way of life.

He stayed there longer than he meant to and, consequently, didn't reach the village in the Bavarian Alps until midafternoon.

Back with an offbeat piece in a semi-thriller mode is California's Robert S. Levinson. The story stars Clegg, the sympathetic bad guy from his celebrated novel *Hot Paint,* who, this time out, is invited to a dangerous meeting with a Nazi sympathizer at the top of a Bavarian mountain. Mr. Levinson's latest novel is *Where the Lies Begin* (Five Star Press), a book the *Baltimore Sun* hailed as "(An) ever-surprising, character-rich thriller." ✝

The village was small, as quaint and clean as a stage set in one of those operettas like *The Student Prince,* or something newer, like *The Sound of Music.* He pictured Julie Andrews in the movie version, in a place like this, leading the precocious von Trapp kids and their overbearing father to first place in the annual talent contest, then over the Alps to escape from the Nazis, and was stumbling through the lyrics of "So Long, Farewell" when he arrived at Von Harbou Hall.

The hall was easy to find, the only two-story building on the broad road, exactly as advertised by Dr. Von Harbou, who had to be the man pacing out front, checking the watch attached by a heavy gold chain to the vest pocket of his conservative three-piece black suit.

Von Harbou was in his mid to late sixties and small of stature,

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with a full head of white hair worn in a tight crew cut. His irritated expression converted to a questionable smile as Clegg pulled up in front and cut the engine, and he snapped the watch shut and returned it to his vest, double-checking the pocket with a couple of pats on his way to the rented cocoa-colored Mercedes.

"Herr Clegg?"

Clegg nodded as he stepped from the car and took Von Harbou's outstretched hand.

"Sorry to be late," Clegg said, not sorry at all, but aware an apology would appeal to a German's passion for promptness. "An honor, Herr Doktor," Clegg said, meaning it less than his apology.

"Mine, indeed," Von Harbou said, exposing more of his tiny, tobacco-stained teeth, the smile still too rich to be sincere. "I was expecting you by now and was getting worried. Sometimes, the road, it can be tricky-dangerous for someone who doesn't know it well." The German's English accent was clipped, but otherwise almost faultless.

"I stopped briefly in Munich, to see the Frauenkirche and the Theatinerkirche, then along the way to admire the views. The beauty of your countryside got the best of me."

"Yes, especially this time of the year. The higher you get, the more beautiful. The unspoiled beauty of nature. Her palette on full display, past even a landscape by Rubens, a Degas, a—"

"Van Gogh."

"But of course," Von Harbou said, allowing a slender smile. "Good one there, Herr Clegg. Good one. The sights are breathtaking and unlike the city, they give us opportunity to contemplate what life is truly all about."

"I was able to do that, yes."

"Shall we move indoors?" He stepped aside and gestured for Clegg to go first. "Maybe later, after we have conducted our business, you will allow me to take you on a tour of the beauty God has invested in our corner of the world going all the way back to the fifteenth century. I can promise you you won't be disappointed."

"With pleasure, thank you," Clegg said, glad he didn't have to suggest it himself.

Von Harbou had him wait in a wood-paneled room the size of a small auditorium that reeked of the centuries, three of the walls almost hidden by rows of neatly hung oils, photos, and documents, all ornately framed to emphasize importance. The paintings indiscriminately mixed portraits, landscapes, mythical and religious themes, some works better than others and none of value evident to Clegg, except as an historical scrapbook.

The east wall was fronted by a stage on which sat an elaborate mahogany desk at least fifteen feet across and a matching podium, a table microphone and speakers on either side the only modern touches.

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The opposite wall was dominated by the largest heating stove Clegg had ever seen, made of cast iron and faced with tiles of white and a delicate blue. Piping ran into the wall at all angles.

"One of our village's prized possessions," Von Harbou said, joining him. "As old as the building itself. Made by hand in a time when craftsmanship meant everything and my countrymen were already considered among the world's best. Years before the building came into possession of my family, it was our *Rathaus*, our city hall. The pipes, you see? They heat all the rooms, originally with wood from our golden forests, but now also oil can do the trick. This was our assembly room. Soon I'll show you the library with books not to be believed. Also the mayor's office, where I have proudly conducted business since the passing of my dear father."

Von Harbou crossed himself.

He tugged at Clegg's shoulder and crossed the room to a section of wall that had mostly latter-day portraits, several of the men striking show-off poses in military uniforms from the two World Wars, the most belligerent looks worn by those wearing Nazi uniforms, one of them an S.S. colonel.

Von Harbou pointed him out. "My late, beloved father," he said, crossing himself again. He studied Clegg's face for a reaction.

Clegg said, "I can see the family resemblance, a strong face," but he showed Von Harbou nothing.

"Strong, yes," Von Harbou said. "Her also." He motioned Clegg's attention to a woman as imposing as the frame around her photograph. "You recognize her?"

Clegg stepped in and studied the photograph at closer range. "No, but she's quite attractive."

"I supposed not. My great-aunt. Also a great actress, but her work was here in our homeland, so that's why. Movies like *Das Wandernde Bild,* her first one with the husband who was her director, and you might know him from America. Fritz Lang?"

Clegg shook his head, shrugged. "Movies, not my thing."

"A hack, really, especially after he left his homeland and my great-aunt behind. No loss. What good movies he made were always because of her. *Vier um die Frau, Dr. Mabuse der Spieler, Die Nibelungen. Frau im Mond.* Silent movies that I never got to see myself, but my grandfather, he told me how any of her movies never needed words when she was standing in front of the camera."

"They had faces then."

"*Ja.* Well spoken, Herr Clegg, but come. I don't mean to bore you with my family history."

"Not in the least, Herr Doktor."

Von Harbou did a sharp about-face and led him out and down the main hall to the library, where books were embalmed in fine leather, their titles on the spines embossed in gold, behind glass-fronted cabinets.

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The library was less than half the size of the assembly room and seemed less worn by use. Spotlessly clean, a smell of disinfectant lingering in the air. Comfortable stuffed chairs covered in fine fabrics, and reading lamps artfully placed, as well as four antique desks from one or another of the Louis periods.

Von Harbou turned the door lock behind them and said, "I had to be sure first no one was here to disturb us. Now, we also have our privacy."

Clegg surveyed the room.

No sign of what he was looking for.

He gave Von Harbou a questioning glance.

Von Harbou answered with a tight grin that inflated his cherry-pink cheeks and arched his thick eyebrows to show off the twinkle in his crystal blue eyes. He said, "You brought it?"

"Of course."

Von Harbou tilted up his chin and cocked his head. "You don't mind showing me first?"

Clegg reached inside his suit jacket and retrieved an envelope, offered it to Von Harbou, who snatched it from him, studied the blank front for a moment, then carefully worked the flap loose. Lifted out the cashier's check as if it might self-destruct if he held it too tightly. Swallowed the room. Pursed his lips and blew out a silent whistle.

"Seeing is believing, Herr Doktor."

"Ja. Ja, ja."

"As agreed upon and exactly as you wished. Four million in U.S. dollars made out to you."

"But untraceable to me."

"To anyone. What you do with it from here on out is up to you."

"It will serve a good cause, I guarantee you."

Von Harbou crossed over to one of the chairs, dropped into it. He nursed the check back into the envelope, tucked in the flap, and put the envelope in a jacket pocket. Looked like he was already spending the four million in his mind.

Clegg's cough brought him back.

Von Harbou understood. He pointed out an orange-colored mailing tube to the left of the door, leaning against a planter stand on which magazines had been stacked.

"You won't be disappointed," Von Harbou said.

Clegg had missed noticing it.

He got the tube and settled on the floor, on his knees.

Removed and unrolled the canvas inside, which had been wrapped in French-language newspapers dating back almost seventy years.

It measured about twenty-six inches by thirty inches.

Clegg inhaled audibly.

Von Harbou cackled. "Vincent contemplating the landscape at

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sunset. The colors, almost like brand-new, vibrant, alive, as on the day Vincent first put them there."

"Yes," Clegg said, "magnificent."

"One like it, only smaller and not so good, went three years ago at auction in New York for more than twice what I agreed on, so you've bought yourself a genuine bargain."

Clegg felt no need to remind Von Harbou that this Van Gogh couldn't be sold that way—

Or to just any collector.

He rolled up the canvas tightly and slid it back into the tube, pressed down hard on the lid, and made sure it was secure.

Checked his watch.

Rising, he said, "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Herr Doktor."

Von Harbou used the armrests to push himself up from his chair and said, "But, wait. The tour that I mentioned. You still have time, it's included in the price, you know? No additional charge."

Clegg had counted on Von Harbou remembering. "If you're sure it's no trouble, there's nothing I'd like more," he said.

Clegg pleaded his aching-hip excuse, the old patter about a need for replacement surgery as the reason for his driving, when Von Harbou proposed walking to what he said was the best observation point, about a half-mile up the hill. He stowed the orange tube in the trunk of the Mercedes.

Von Harbou settled in the passenger seat, began extolling the virtues of clean air and exercise and bragging about the five miles he walked every day, even at his age, as Clegg pulled away from the Rathaus.

"Here a minute," Von Harbou called out hardly a minute later. Clegg hit the brakes. "Over there, I would like you to see first."

Over there was a cemetery on the interior side of the road.

Von Harbou led him inside. "Not so much walking you have to worry," he said.

He kept up a running commentary, sounding like a museum docent whenever he stopped to remark about one or another of the mausoleums, monuments, tombstones, marble crosses, or grave plaques, many carved with dates going back hundreds of years. Many more festooned with flowers and floral wreaths.

Clegg feigned interest, told the old German to take his time; he asked questions, not wanting to seem disinterested or too anxious to move on—to remotely raise suspicion about what he had in mind.

"Here, see," Von Harbou said. He stopped in front of the crypt that rose grandly above all the others on the impeccably groomed grounds. "Mine precious *mutter,* my grandfather, my sisters. All my ancestors. Even here they take care of their own, for all time.

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Except . . . Come."

Von Harbou steered them to a nearby section filled with rows of matching crosses fronted by a mammoth statue of two soldiers in uniform, one from World War I, the other World War II, arms draped across each other's shoulders, bearing the carved legend Von Harbou translated for him:

"Brave Comrades in Arms Known Only to God."

"Beneath there, maybe my father or the brothers I lost to the war. I would like to believe so anyway," Von Harbou said. He drew himself to full height, spine-stiff, and threw back his shoulders. Started to extend his right arm at an angle, but turned it into a forehead salute. Moved the hand to his heart and patted the pocket where he'd deposited the cashier's check. Gazed off to the horizon, then up to the sky, as if he was searching for something he already knew was there.

Clegg wanted to tell Von Harbou about his own losses, but resisted the temptation.

He had discovered a long time ago that life is full of surprises and death can be one of them.

He wondered if Von Harbou knew that, too, or how close he was now to his last surprise.

They moved off the hiking path over to the observation platform that on clear days like today, even at this hour, provided a perfect unobstructed view of the mountain range across the way and the valley miles below them.

"Until today you thought maybe how Disney World has all the Kodak moments, Herr Clegg? Disney World and Disneyland?"

"Not Kodak anymore, Herr Doktor. It's been Fuji Film as long as I can remember."

They stood with their bodies almost touching behind the cobblestone safety wall that rose to his waist and almost to the old man's chest. He had a good six inches on Von Harbou and at least forty pounds, as well as twenty-five years.

Von Harbou looked up to answer Clegg with a grunt that said he didn't appreciate being corrected. His crystal blue eyes sent the same message before he turned back to give the exquisite Alpine view an approving sigh.

"A long time since I was in America, how long I don't remember, but definitely a long, long time. Things change over there as anywhere."

"Same as the seasons," Clegg said.

"Same as the seasons," Von Harbou said, nodding, as if Clegg's agreeing erased having been corrected.

"Same as things change here, Herr Doktor."

"*Ja,* things change here, but not the things that truly matter."

Von Harbou passed an index finger over the dueling scar that ran

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like a fat worm from the hollow beneath his cheek to just below his nicked left earlobe, shocking pink against his eggshell-white skin.

The look he gave Clegg spoke thoughts Clegg could see Von Harbou had no intention of sharing.

Clegg said, "What truly matters grows in value with the passage of time."

"*Ja.* Well put, Herr Clegg. Well put." He clenched his right fist and punched the cloudless sky. "I sensed from the minute we met, the strength of your handshake, how you were a man with a mind that doesn't dwell on the obvious only."

"I didn't mean to be obvious about that."

Von Harbou smiled. "Another good one from you," he said, stepping back from the wall. "I have enjoyed your sense of humor during our brief time together and almost regret what must happen next."

Clegg turned to Von Harbou and saw they were not alone.

Three punks, standing in a row eight or ten feet away. Young. Bald-headed. Large and muscular. Wearing black T-shirts and denims. Brando jackets and boots. Earrings. Nose rings. Bad-ass expressions. Punks brewing for a beer-hall putsch. One had a Glock leveled at him. The other two were unarmed, mashing their fingers into fists the size of grapefruits.

Von Harbou joined them. "To let you leave with the Van Gogh would mean I was unable to sell it again at some future date and continue to raise the money we need to fulfill our dreams," he said.

"We both know it's a painting that's not easy to sell, Herr Doktor."

"Harder if I don't have it, Herr Clegg."

"People will hear the gunfire and come running."

"They hear all the time backfire from cars, so think nothing of it, but my plans call for you to have a tragic accident, falling down the mountain when you lean over to have a better look. Jump or my young men will give you a lift over the wall, your choice. Either way, you will be passed out and past pain long before you hit the bottom."

"Should I say thank you?"

"Goodbye is more appropriate. . . . Walter, Klaus, help Herr Clegg make his decision."

The unarmed pair moved on Clegg like gorillas after a feast. Clegg shifted quickly so that they shielded him from the Glock. In the same motion, he whipped out the Colt .38 short-barrel special from the snatch holster on his belt and got off two shots that echoed off the mountains.

He caught one punk in the chest, the other a fraction lower. Then hit the ground before either of them, did a roll, and came up on his belly. Put two bullets into the third punk, who dropped the Glock on his way down. The next shot reached Von Harbou before he could reach the Glock. It caught him just below the shoulder blade and sent him sprawling.

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Clegg moved on him, dropped to his haunches, and rolled Von Harbou over. Von Harbou was still alive. Struggling for breath. Staring back arrogantly.

Clegg said, "Nice try, Herr Doktor, but never again."

He pressed the .38 under Von Harbou's chin and squeezed the trigger.

Clegg dragged the bodies to the Mercedes. He pushed and pulled them inside, one by one, in under half an hour, sweating profusely, propelled by the notion that a hiker could come along at any moment, or people from the village who realized so much noise had to be more than backfire.

He filched the envelope containing the cashier's check from Von Harbou's jacket pocket and returned it to his own, got the orange mailing tube from the trunk and settled it on the ground next to his carry-on, then revved up the Mercedes and angled it so that the car faced the platform.

He eased out from behind the wheel with the shift still in drive and released the emergency brake, backed out of the way, and watched the Mercedes roll through the brick safety wall and hover in space before plunging out of sight. It seemed like hours before he heard the faint sound of a crash. He moved to the edge and tossed out the Glock, then the .38 special.

Heading up the mountain trail, Clegg felt no remorse, but instead something closer to exuberance, as if he had just had some sort of purifying experience.

By nightfall Clegg was in Salzburg. A room was on reserve for him at the Hotel Bristol on Makart Platz, under one of the assumed names he had used in Hong Kong, but never in Europe. The fax awaiting his arrival said: "Phone any hour. Another masterpiece has surfaced."

He stretched out on the narrow bed, shut his eyes against the harsh overhead light, thought again about the kids in *The Sound of Music,* and began whistling that tune, that happy tune that Julie Andrews sang to them.

So, another masterpiece to retrieve, maybe a few more murders to charge against his conscience, then maybe he could reunite with his son once and for all time.

His son.

The only masterpiece that mattered to him.

That precious jewel of a child.

His son.

Clegg reach blindly for the phone on the nightstand and gave the number to the hotel operator. ●

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ON THE SAFE SIDE

by Priscilla Masters

It had started off as a perfectly ordinary day. Alarm waking me up, quick jump into the shower, coffee, orange juice, slice or two of toast and Vegemite. Glance at the morning's post: electricity and council-tax bills, and the TV licence was about to expire, plus an advert for tasty-looking conservatories headed with the fable: *Put thousands of added value on your house.*

Nothing unusual there.

Peck on the cheek for Aileen.

Journey to work about twenty minutes.

Best known for her Joanna Piercy mysteries, Priscilla Masters recently began a new series set in Shrewsbury, England, starring coroner Martha Gunn. The second Gunn novel was released in hardcover in the U.K. by Allison & Busby in June of 2007. This is the author's first story for *EQMM*, a twisty tale of cops on the take. †

Then things started to hot up a bit.

Mike Lorenzo met me at the door, already strapping his belt on. "We're to do a bust, matey," he said. "You and me pay a little visit to Martin Street, go and see what a nice little druggie's up to."

Lorenzo gave me a slow, meaningful wink. I knew what that meant. We'd done jobs together before. There was often a nice little bonus hanging around these people if you looked hard enough. Under the mattress, behind the lavatory cistern, in the fridge, or even, sometimes, if they were careful little sods, in the freezer. The odd snifter we could shove in our pockets and flog to another of the poor, hooked bastards. Money sort of floated around, too. In nice, neat little wads. Twenties usually. A few hundred quid here and there that the tax man couldn't get his grasping, thieving mitts on. Mikey and I had decided we were a *much* more deserving cause than the war in Iraq or some other asylum-seeker sinkhole. No—we spent money constructively, on our wives and kids and nice holidays far away from the scumbags we dealt with on a daily basis.

So off we went to Martin Street, to the scruffiest house in the block. They always are. Druggies aren't into property ladders. Their house is simply a place to shoot up, where they won't get nabbed—they hope.

We busted the door nice and noisy and found the druggie half

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comatosed in a dingy little downstairs room. Lorenzo and me had a quick look round *before* we called the ambulance and found a rich seam—as the miners would say.

I glanced at the bag of humanity sprawled across the bed and wondered how the hell he'd got access to twenty thousand quid and what felt like a good few ounces of dirty brown heroin. God only knows what they'd mixed it with. Shame was, the poor little blighter died. Sometime during the search he must have breathed his last, a bit before the ambulance arrived.

Me and Mikey had a good contact who cleaned us of the heroin for eight-K and we stashed the cash on the understanding that we wouldn't blow the lot on squandery but would kind of leak it gently into the household finances and the cash flow of the nation. Even so—we couldn't resist a small celebration with the girls. A stretch limo in Barbie-doll pink would have been a bit obvious and over-the-top, but after treating the girls to a little shopping spree we did manage a chauffeur-driven Rolls to take us to a country-house hotel a few miles from home and lived it up for the night. Champagne, caviar, and a wonderful steak that melted in your mouth like good old-fashioned butter.

The girls didn't ask where the money had come from. Coppers' women don't ask too many questions. They know full well they might not like the answers. But Dad had sort of explained it to me when I was a lad. "Son," he said. "Coppers" (he was a copper) "roll around in muck all the time. They deal with the sad dregs of society. It's a sort of inevitability . . ." He said the word very slowly and deliberately, like he wanted me to remember it. ". . . that some of the mud sticks to your clothes. Understand, my boy?"

I'd nodded, wide-eyed because I did sort of understand. I think even though I was only eight years old I knew perfectly well what my dad was talking about. He was a good old man.

The girls enjoyed the evening. I really liked Caron, Mikey's wife. She was Irish, bleached-blond, and funny, and she always got fairly pissed. She was a bit like my first wife, Dawn. Very extrovert and flirtatious. But with Caron that was only skin deep. Underneath she was *devoted* to Mikey.

Aileen, my current partner, was almost the exact opposite of Caron. Quiet, reserved, and a bit shy until she got to know people. Then she opened up. But you know what I really liked about her right from the start?

Loyalty.

She'd do anything for me. And I mean *anything.* As you will see.

So the weeks passed. The only real difference was the sound of our renovations *and* the conservatory being built. After all . . . "*Everyone* these days has an *en suite,*" Aileen said. And yes, I was

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proud of it too—from the Indian cane furniture to the pottery tiger which lurked in the corner. When Mikey and Caron returned from their Caribbean cruise we had some boozy evenings sitting in the conservatory overlooking the garden, lit by some very subtle and well-placed flood lighting. Oh—didn't I mention that? In fact, if it hadn't been for Mrs. Nosey-Neighbour Barnes we could all have been in the middle of the Caribbean it was so perfect.

I remember that night in glorious Technicolor. It all seemed so worth it. *This* was the real reward of being a cop. At least a *clever* cop. The only slight flaw in the entire evening was Mikey saying something disparaging about the area going down a bit. He looked around at the sheer opulence of our extension and the truly *awesome* conservatory—the most expensive in the catalogue. "Sure you're not pricing yourself out of the market, Steve?"

I turned round, barbecue fork in my hand with a couple of sausages on it. One of the sausages slid off while I gaped at what I read as his jealousy. "What do you mean?"

"There's a couple of odds lurking around the end of your road."

"The bloody Social Services," I said, spearing another sausage. "One of those Care in the Community thingies. There's half a dozen weirdos living there, courtesy of the local council. All blokes. Not old. Some of them only our age, but unlike us they don't do anything useful with their lives like cleaning up the mean streets of Staffordshire. The social workers and psychiatric nurses are in and out all day long." I spooned some beans onto his plate. "All paid for by you and me, out of the taxes we *do* pay." I winked at him. "They don't do any harm, but they do tend to hang around the triangle at the bottom of the street. I don't think . . ." I glanced, for reassurance, at Aileen.

"Of course they don't bring the area down," she said soothingly.

I think the evening everything changed was in late September. We were aware the nights had been drawing in and didn't sit in the conservatory quite so often. Maybe it was even the first of October the night that Mikey came round, his face pale and frightened looking. I took him straight into the conservatory, ignoring the chill.

"Hey," I said. "What's up? Have a beer. Sit down."

He grabbed my shoulder. Honest. He looked so bad he was like a dead man walking.

"Party's over," he said hoarsely. "Party's over." He deliberately shut the door of the conservatory and turned back to face me.

"People have been asking questions," he said. "About us. About the raid. Missing money. Drugs. Porky Flambard said people was asking round the nick who'd been the arresting officers that night, who'd come into money. Nasty sorts. One of them . . ." His voice dropped and I bent my head in close. "They said he didn't speak English. Looked flash. Porky said they was speaking Spanish. It's

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the big boys. They've come for *us.*"

"Brazen it out," I said, sloshing back my beer and trying to ignore the little flutter in my chest. "But maybe we should go easy on the spending. Just for a bit. Make out we're hard up, eh? Go on about how we've overspent on the house and holidays and things."

He shook his head sadly. "It won't work," he said. "Word's already around. And they've . . ." He could hardly get the next few words out. "Steve."

I swallowed my *Pull yourself together* comment.

"They've asked Professional Standards Unit to take a look. If they think there's a sniff of truth in the allegation, we'll be suspended. Then the Independent Police Complaints Authority will be involved."

I got my bottle up then. "Guy Whelan was dead," I snarled, reflecting not for the first time that it seemed a posh name for the little saddo who'd expired at the very moment that we were turning over his filthy little nest. "Don't go weedin' out on me now. How can they know *what* was in that flat. *Anyone* could have thieved the money. It doesn't have to be us. They can't prove anything. Whelan could even have spent it himself. And as for the heroin: *He died.*" I spoke the words right into his face. "How can *anyone* be sure he didn't shoot up the bloody lot?"

His look changed to one of pity. For me. "Maybe we'd have got away with it if we hadn't been so flash," he said, his eyes rolling around the room. "But look around you." His eyes landed on my beloved Casa Fina pottery tiger, jaws snarling, glass eyes gleaming. "It's proper posh. It's obvious." With that he walked to the door, pulled it open, and passed straight through it.

I never saw him alive again.

I was on nights that week, Mikey on earlies, so we hardly saw each other, but four nights later when I arrived on my night shift the sergeant pulled me over. "Mike Lorenzo was a pal of yours, wasn't he?"

I started to say, "Still is as far as I know." But instead I stared at him. "*Was?*" I queried. "What do you mean *was?*"

The sergeant put a friendly hand on my shoulder. "Steve," he said awkwardly, "I'm sorry to have to tell you this but . . ." I could hear that his mouth was dry. His tongue was sticking to his palate. I waited, feeling my shoulders brace. "He was stabbed this morning."

I heard the words but nothing went in. It was as though they had been spoken in another language. Then I heard my own voice speaking the same language. "What happened?" I begged. "Tell me what happened?"

"He was on the beat, in a shopping centre. It was an unprovoked attack. He was stabbed. Right through the heart."

I didn't like this. "Did you get the bloke?"

"Melted away in the crowd." There was something odd, evasive

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even, in the sergeant's manner. I waited.

"Thing is," he said, "there's something else. It looked like Mike was the target. The constable he'd been on the beat with said he'd noticed the guy hanging around a couple of days before."

He stood there, chewing his lip, and I walked out.

I walked the streets, thinking. Remembering. Mikey and me had done our cadetting together. We'd been chums. And now?

I went round to his house. There was loads of cars outside. As I watched, a van drew up and they started filming. It would be a cause célèbre, I knew. Unprovoked stabbing of a policeman?

Caron herself opened the door and stared at me steadily before speaking. "I didn't know everything about you and Mikey," she said in a low voice, "but I knew for sure that you both suddenly got awful lucky on the lottery." She gave a wry smile as though it was a joke. But I can tell you I wished very heartily that we *had* got our money from the lottery. We might have kept our lives then.

"Someone did for him," she said. "He was frightened for weeks before they got him. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't concentrate. He'd sit up in the chair nights on end. He even talked about getting a gun. He knew they were coming, but they still got him," she said, "and they'll get you, too."

She closed the door gently in my face. It felt like the lid of a coffin coming down on me.

I pulled myself together and went home.

I'd never before realised what a very clever person my wife was. Aileen was quiet, as I have said. But inside her head she could think up ideas so clever, so imaginative, that I used to say she should have been a writer.

You see, there was nothing I could do except come clean. I told her it all, about the drugs raid, the money, the drugs Mikey had flogged. She looked around at the affluence of our house and said nothing. But I could tell she was thinking. Really hard. Really really hard. I could tell by the way her lips went pencil thin. And determined. And her eyes went sort of spikey looking.

Then she reached over and touched my hand. It was the most loving and kindly of gestures. I could almost have cried. "I've benefited from all this wealth," she said quietly. "The clothes, the meals out, the holidays, the jaunts, and most of all this house."

I tried to make some sort of suitable response, but she carried on talking. "Therefore I have a responsibility, too," she said. "I have an idea."

And that was the beginning of it.

I knew as well as she did that it all hinged on identification. Aileen made some pretty good points, the first being that the druggies would not be satisfied with simply going for Mike, that they would,

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certainly, come for me. I was as good as a dead man. The second being that as my next of kin she would be the one to identify my "corpse," and the third and most important point being that one of our nutty neighbours was roughly the same height and build as me. A bit paunchier but tall. She even had the clever idea of applying for a passport in his name. No need to forge one for me to make my escape and don't tell me *he'd* ever been abroad. She befriended him, found out his name, place of birth, mother's maiden name, and his birthday to get a birth certificate. We applied to have one within the week.

I daresay the inhabitants of Number Seven often went AWOL so no problems there. No one was going to come looking for *him!*

Tidy him up, hair cut, *my* wallet in his pocket, and lastly, his battered body being found in *my* house. Like Aileen, I decided it was worth the risk.

After all—what choice did I have?

I didn't go back to work but took compassionate leave. I used the time wisely. Within a week, the precious document was in my hand.

It turned out to be easy to lure my selected victim to the house. He was a trusting soul. He didn't even mind when we trimmed his hair, gave him some of my clothes to wear. He kept babbling on about "kindly people" and asking for a fag. Aileen left me to it. I knew the way the cops think in a killing. They always finger the collar of the nearest person—usually the spouse. So she had a date with Caron.

Even the killing bit was easier than I had imagined. He must have had a weak skull or something. I heard it crack with the first blow of the golf club and gave him a few more just to be on the safe side. In fact, I quite enjoyed it. I had it all worked out, wearing gloves and pressing his fingers round the stem of the murder weapon.

Careful now. I smiled. Don't want to turn into a loony monster type of serial killer. But honestly it *was* fairly easy. I stepped back and peeled off my boiler suit to reveal my ordinary clothes.

Now it was important to establish *my* alibi.

This is how clever my wife is. She'd borrowed Mrs. Nosey Barnes's garden shears a week before, so how easy was it for me to return them, dropping casually into the conversation that I couldn't stop for the proffered beer because I wanted to watch *Crime Watch.* "Aileen's out," I said. I didn't add, *With a friend, having a curry to establish her alibi.* "So I can watch a bit of telly in peace."

She returned my smile nicely, without the slightest clue that she had just been used, and I wandered back to the house to fake my own murder.

We'd put *my* clothes on him. Now I put *his* in my rucksack. I would take them far away and dump them in a wheelie bin somewhere.

I'd taken the precaution of buying an awful, cheap car for cash, through the papers, and keeping the remainder of my stash of money with me. The car I'd parked round the corner, ready for my getaway.

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I switched the telly on and watched the gorgeous Fiona Bruce introduce my programme. I blew her a kiss. Time for action and a bit of scene-setting. It was so easy. I simply pretended I was an actor acting out the scene. Breaking in through the back door. Plenty of noise but not too much. I didn't want Nosey Barnes coming round to see if I was all right. Not now. It would have ruined the whole thing. I bashed the already-dead schizo a bit more, and to my ultimate grief took a swing at my most treasured possession with a number-nine iron. The thing is, there *had* to be the signs of a struggle. I *would* have struggled, so there *had* to be damage, so my tiger was smashed.

I know that pathologists will argue forever about the time of death. Basically, the only thing they really agree on is that time of death is sometime between the last sighting of the victim and the time of finding his or her body. I was safe on that one. Mrs. Nosey Barnes would be quick to put her oar in the stream and tell the cops that I had popped round a little before nine.

Aileen was set to stay out until a little after ten, by which time I would be seventy or so miles down the M6, so the time of death would be fixed at between nine and ten, when I had actually finished the psycho off at twenty minutes *before* nine. I challenge the very best pathologist in the whole wide world to pinpoint a time of death down to twenty minutes, but just to be on the safe side I'd made sure the room was warm—to slow down the rate of body cooling. Now I switched the central heating off and opened the windows.

The one thing I had *absolutely* no worries about was Aileen's ability to act the part of first-on-the-scene after her husband's *terrible murder.*

I had also got a pay-as-you-go mobile phone, because it would be nice to know how things were going for my "widow." After I'd roughed the room up a bit I splashed a bit of petrol around just for good measure, set a match to it, and walked out of my house forever. Aileen and I would meet up when she'd sorted out the sale of the house, widow's pension, insurances. See how important it is to marry a competent woman? I'd planned to move to Bolivia.

But I was forgetting a few things. Smoke rises. Fires go out. Smoke alarms go off.

I got the story from Aileen.

Mrs. Nosey Barnes from next-door heard the smoke alarm, got her husband to peer over the wall, and he saw the smoke and the broken glass well before time. *He* rang the emergency services, the police, the fire engine, and the ambulance.

An ambulance?

They dragged the body out. Only it wasn't a body. Interfering paramedics felt for a bloody carotid pulse. And know what? They found one. My murder wasn't. So they put an oxygen mask over his/"my" face and with the blue light flashing screamed their way

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to the hospital while the fire engine dealt with the fire.

Get it so far?

And the police were tracking down my wife to tell her someone's tried to kill her husband and burn the house down.

Same story but different backdrop.

She was supposed to be the one to find the terrible carnage. Not them. And she wasn't meant to learn about it in the Jaipur over poppadoms and chicken jalfrezi. It was, admittedly, a help that she was with Caron, who couldn't have reacted better, putting her hand over her mouth and saying, "They've got him, too." Which was right on cue.

The kindly police took Aileen to the hospital to see her "husband." And the psycho opened his eyes, smiled, and said, "Hello, Mrs. Arnold. I've got a bit of a headache."

At which point even my wife broke down and started screaming.

Sometimes my colleagues can be smarter than you'd ever give them credit for. Porky bloody Flambard was the sausage-eating sergeant who'd been elected to drive my *almost-widow* to the hospital. He put his fat little arm around my beloved, sat her down in the chair, and said, "It isn't him, is it?"

I think by then Aileen was fast approaching a gibbering wreck.

But Porky's got a soft, greasy little voice and he persisted.

"So if it isn't 'im, then who is it? And where is your Steve?"

When she didn't answer, he put his podgy face right by hers. "Now then, darlin'," he said. "You don't want to spend the rest of your days in a nasty, cold, dirty old prison, do you? Charged with being a) an accessory to attempted murder and b) withholding information pertaining to the theft of drugs and cash from a crime scene by a serving police officer? So let's start with the first question, shall we? Who is the geezer in the bed and how did he come to have such nasty head injuries?"

By now she was shaking all over and *couldn't* have spoken if she'd wanted to.

"Mind if I take a look?" he'd said and reached inside her handbag, pulled out her mobile phone, scrolled through to "Steve," and pressed the green button.

"Hello, Steve," he said when I answered. "Just thought I'd let you know. Your bloke isn't dead but currently sitting up in a hospital bed, a dirty great big bandage wrapped around his head, eating a marmalade sandwich. You couldn't even manage a murder, could you? Now then. Why don't you tell us where exactly you are and we'll bring you home."

All in all I only have one real regret. It's my tiger. My lovely pottery tiger. Broken forever. But I reckon I'm probably safer here, in an English jail, than out there, patrolling the streets, waiting for Juan or Pedro or Sanchez to try a bit of knife practice on my back.

Agree? ●

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EXPOSURE

by Tim L. Williams

Memphis private eye Charlie Raines, a recurring character in a number of Tim L. Williams's short stories, including a previous tale published by *EQMM*, is back this month in another morally ambiguous outing. His creator is a college professor whose work has appeared in numerous literary quarterlies, as well as in crime magazines such as *Plots With Guns*, *Murdaland*, and *Red Scream*.

Despite my better judgment and the nagging pain in the pit of my stomach that I called indigestion but knew for a fact was guilt, I went to visit Mark McAllister in the Memphis city jail. I didn't want to be there. Early spring in Memphis is the best time of year, maybe the only good one when you consider the smoke-gray chill of winter, the rain and mud of fall, and the smothering heat of summer. As I passed through metal detectors, signed forms promising not to sue if I were unlucky enough to be killed by one of the inmates, and nodded hello to a sprinkling of deputy jailers who remembered me from my days as a Memphis homicide detective, I told myself that if I'd had the good sense to ignore McAllister's call, I would have spent the afternoon fishing on the Mississippi or taking a long walk through Riverside Park. Those were lies, of course. If I'd hung up on McAllister, I would have been at the Refugee's Lounge in Whitehaven, drinking draft beer, getting my elbows grimy on the sticky bar, and betting on the wrong teams in the first round of the NCAA tournament.

A three-hundred-pound deputy jailer with horn-rimmed glasses, acne scars, and hair the color of pipe rust grunted instructions. By the time he finished, he was wheezing, and his face had turned the color of his hair. I remembered him. Gil Brewer. A diabetic and closet alcoholic with a three-pack-a-day Marlboro habit. If it hadn't been for the fact that he was cruel and stupid, I might have felt sorry for him.

"Some deal, huh, Charlie," he said as he unlocked a green metal door. "Kid spends a lifetime looking for his old man just so he can pop him." His gray eyes twinkled merrily. "Hey, that's pretty frigging good. Pop his pop." He wheezed laughter, coughed, and spat on

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the floor. "I hope you collected your fee up front."

Brewer led me down a walkway lined with cells to a small holding room in the back. In every prison movie I'd ever seen, inmates greeted a new arrival by catcalling, hurling insults, and hanging on the bars of their cells, but as a cop and then as a private investigator I'd visited a few dozen jails and half as many prisons, and that had never happened. Ninety percent of the inmates barely registered anyone's presence. The few who did watched quietly from their cells, their eyes either trapped and hopeless or cold and appraising. The only sounds that followed Brewer and me were a few coughs, a sneeze, Brewer's wheeze, and the echo of our footsteps on the stained concrete floor.

Inside the holding room, Mark McAllister sat at a scarred picnic table that had been bolted to the floor. He wore handcuffs, shackles, and a standard-issue orange jumpsuit. When he looked up, I noticed a half-dozen cuts and scratches on his face and an ugly bruise just below his cheekbone. He looked smaller than he had in my office, younger, defeated, terrified. He should have been. He was charged with first-degree murder in the death of his biological father, the man I'd helped him find.

"I appreciate your coming, Mr. Raines," he said, his voice as shaky as his smile. "I wasn't sure you would."

I sat across from him at the table. "I'm not sure why I did."

Brewer snorted, dropped his bulk into a chair in the rear corner, passed gas, and scrubbed at a mustard stain on his chin. Then he reached for a *National Enquirer* and rattled the pages.

McAllister ignored him. "I know what they say, but I didn't do nothing like that. I couldn't do nothing like that, Mr. Raines, not to anybody, but especially not to my own father."

Pure Missouri hills and as twangy as an out-of-tune banjo, his accent grated on my nerves and brought another sharp pain to the center of my gut. I'd hit middle age and had the paunch, the crow's feet, and the receding hairline to prove it. I wasn't happy to have been duped by a nineteen-year-old punk from Carlsbad, Missouri.

"Mr. Raines, you got to help me here. . . ."

"You can drop the mister. Anybody who hires me under false pretenses and makes me complicit in a murder has earned the right to call me Charlie."

He lowered his head, touched one of the cuts on his cheek. "I lied to you. I'm not saying I didn't, but I figured if I told you everything, you wouldn't take the job. But lying and killing are completely different things."

When McAllister had shown up in my office to hire me to find a father that he hadn't seen in seventeen years, he'd fed me a line. His mother had recently passed away. He was a welder at a factory in Missouri, took classes at a community college at night, and was just a month away from marrying his high-school sweetheart. Since

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he was an only child and had only a sprinkling of relatives, he'd decided to find the father who had deserted his family and fled to Memphis. The thought of the bride's side of the church being packed with family while his side was completely empty made him sick to his stomach. I'd bought it all, even cut him a discount when he said he was using part of his mother's life-insurance policy to pay me. Maybe it was because he seemed naive or maybe because my own father had left when I was ten and McAllister's story touched a nerve.

The morning after I gave Mark his father's address, Don McAllister was found dead, and I found out that most of what my client had said was fantasy. He wasn't a welder or a community-college student or engaged to his childhood sweetheart. He was on parole for assault and battery, had spent half of his teenage years in reform school, and made his living by dealing drugs in his hometown.

"You're wasting my time," I said, angry all over again. "You lied to me, made me look like a fool at best and an accomplice in a murder at the worst. The only thing that's keeping me from whipping your ass is that I don't relish the idea of spending a week in lockup."

He breathed deep, winced as if he'd taken in a lungful of needles. "I didn't kill him, Mr.—Charlie." He licked his lips. "I got drunk before I went to see him. Real drunk. I told myself I was just going to have one or two to calm my nerves, suck up my courage, you know? But two didn't work so I kept drinking. Then I showed up at his house. When he opened the door, it took him a little while to realize who I was, and then he called me son." McAllister closed his eyes. "He had no right to call me that. Not as soon as he saw me, not after what he did to me and my momma."

"Listen . . ." I said.

"It made me want to cry," McAllister said, his voice breaking. "And then it made me mad. I hauled off and hit him in the mouth." He held up a scabbed and dirt-streaked right hand to show me the teeth marks. "Then I ran back to my car bawling like a baby. I remember pulling off the side of the road to throw up and stopping at a liquor store for another bottle. I guess I blacked out, because I don't remember anything else until I woke up in my hotel room covered in puke and stinking like an outhouse."

"Call a lawyer."

"I didn't kill him," he said again. "Jesus, I just wanted to know him and know why he ditched us. That's all I wanted. Now, I reckon, I'll never know."

I felt a tremor of sympathy and warned myself not to be a sap for a second time. Still, the tremor didn't stop. What if the kid was telling the truth? What if it was just his bad fortune to find his old man on the night that somebody decided to shoot him? And hell, even if he had killed his father, who was I to judge? There'd been plenty of times I'd wanted to shoot my old man since he'd blundered back into my life.

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"I know a good attorney, okay? I'll contact him, have him come see you," I said, cursing my own stupidity as I spoke the words. "That's the best I can do."

The kid beamed. Brewer lowered his *National Enquirer,* gave me a look that said I was the world's biggest sucker. But that was all right. He wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know.

Later that afternoon I walked into the Alligator, a Union Avenue dive with pretensions of being a sports bar, and found my former homicide partner hunched over a mug of draft beer at a small table near a pinball machine. The day shift had just given way to the night at the Midtown precinct. Young patrol officers with crew cuts, swollen biceps, spotless uniforms, and freshly shined shoes shot pool, flirted with dyed-blond waitresses, ordered pitchers of draft beer, and gunned shots of tequila with the good-time abandon of college frat boys. Older plainclothes cops from Robbery–Homicide and Vice sat in smaller groups, their cheap suits rumpled and smeared with ash or damp with spilled beer. They were quieter than their younger colleagues, and both their eyes and their rare smiles seemed hard and weary. Nate Randolph, who'd recently been promoted to lieutenant, sat by himself, his dark brown forehead beaded with sweat, his eyes bloodshot, his posture that of a hungry bear protecting a fresh kill from scavengers.

I crossed the room, elbowing my way through the crowd, ignoring the stares. For most of the cops in the Alligator, their hostility wasn't personal. I was just an outsider who'd blundered into their world. But there were a few who remembered me, and their expressions were a mixture of contempt, pity, and barely restrained anger. In a lot of ways, quitting the police force is like leaving a cult. Your walking away isn't just a personal decision, it's a repudiation of everything your former brothers are willing to die for.

I took a chair at Nate's table without waiting for an invitation. "Let me buy you a drink."

"Leave a five-dollar bill and I'll send you a thank-you note tomorrow."

"It's good to see you've developed a sense of humor. It isn't much of one, but at least it's a start."

He tried glaring and then glowering, finally gave up and settled for looking morose. I flagged a waitress, ordered a round of beers, asked how his wife was doing. Mistake. They'd divorced a year and a half ago. I apologized; he grunted.

"What do you want, Raines?" he asked after he downed a quarter of his beer in a single swallow. "Spit it out and then get out of here."

"You're grumpier than usual."

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "I've pulled two double shifts in the last three days. The one damn chance I get to have a drink in peace, you show up like a mangy dog begging for scraps."

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"Mark McAllister."

He raised his head a little, smiled. "The kid who killed his long-lost father. You got egg on your face on that one."

"What do you know about his case?"

He belched, winced, washed down his indigestion with another drink of beer. "You lose your ability to read people or are you so hard up for cash you don't bother to check out your clients anymore?"

"I bought his line."

He emptied his mug, slapped it hard on the table, and raised his eyebrow. I took the hint, waved at the waitress, and held up two fingers for another round.

"Your boy went to his father's house, punched him around a little, stormed off. Sometime later, he came back with a .22 automatic, shot dear old dad four times at close range, and took off again. Neighbor heard the original commotion, got your boy's license-plate number, phoned it in. Next morning he was found in a whore's motel off the I-40 loop, still half drunk, beat up, with blood and puke on his clothes. When officers searched his Firebird, they found a half-dozen .22 shells scattered in the floorboard under empty beer cans and cigarette packs. End of story."

"I read the police report."

He accepted another beer from the waitress and brought it to his lips without letting it touch the table. "Then why bother me?" He stifled a belch. "What do you care?"

"I'm curious by nature."

"You want the God's honest truth? I don't give a damn about your curiosity or McAllister or his old man. Last week and a half, four of Little Vinnie Montesi's bagmen have been robbed and killed, one of them at three in the afternoon in a public park."

I mumbled a wow because that was all that I could think to say. Little Vinnie Montesi ran the mob in Memphis. He'd replaced his uncle, Fat Tony, a couple of years ago. Fat Tony had been tough, ruthless, as dangerous as a Bengal tiger when someone infringed on his territory, but essentially a rational and loyal man. I'd had an occasion to work with him once and owed him my life. But he and his nephew had little in common other than their last names. A coke-head with the facial tick and the megalomania that plagued long-time addicts, Little Vinnie was known for being smart, high-strung, and relentlessly vicious.

"Last thing we need in this town is a gang war with a bunch of Elvis-loving tourists caught in the middle. That happens, the chamber of commerce, the mayor, and the police chief are going to be as unpleasant as wasps on crank."

"Wasps use speed?"

He glared at me. "A figure of speech. What I'm saying is, I got my own problems to worry about. You want to know anything about your boy, ask the guys working his case."

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He turned his chair, bellowed for Elswick and Johnson to join us. They were a little younger than Nate and I, but I remembered Elswick as a rookie uniform. He was tall, blond, broad-shouldered, and sunburned. His partner, Johnson, was a whip-thin black man with a thick moustache and razor bumps on his jaws.

"You guys know Charlie Raines?"

Johnson stroked his moustache like a guy who hadn't had it long. "By reputation."

"We know one of your clients." Elswick smirked, took a sip from a glass of what looked like bourbon and water. "We had a few questions for you."

"Ask away."

"No need now," Johnson said. "We figured out the answers."

"And?"

"We've got his prints, a witness who put him at the scene, blood on his clothes, shells in his car, a motive for murder. We also got him on record as telling one of his buddies up in Missouri that he was going to find his father in Memphis and might have to stick around long enough to help put him in the ground."

"You still working for him?" Elswick asked.

"No."

He ignored my answer. "The best thing you can tell your client is to cop a plea. If he's lucky, the D.A. might settle for murder without premeditation."

"Did you find the weapon?"

"None of your business," Johnson said.

"You check any other suspects?"

"Again, none of your business," Elswick said.

"I'm not trying to undercut your case."

"This conversation is already an unpleasant memory," Johnson said, turning towards Nate. "We'll send you a drink over, Loot. Join us when you're ready."

I gave up, threw a five-dollar bill in front of Nate. "Thanks for your help."

He took a deep breath and let it out through his nostrils. "Your boy's guilty, Charlie. But if you're looking for other suspects, check out Don McAllister's private life. Who knows? You might find something to help you."

"His private life?"

"Memphis is an old-fashioned place. Once you get out of the pink zone downtown, life can be hard for a middle-aged fairy."

"Don McAllister was gay?"

"Arrested back in the mid 'nineties for lewd behavior. Evidently, McAllister and a truck driver were getting amorous outside a nightclub on Summer Avenue."

"I owe you one."

"You and the rest of the world." He drained the rest of his beer

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and picked up the crumpled, beer-soggy five I'd thrown on his table. "The problem is, all you bastards want to repay me on an installment plan."

Three days later, I was convinced that Nate had developed a perverse sense of humor and had intentionally pointed me in the wrong direction. I'd spent the better part of seventy-two hours drinking German beer in trendy downtown bars, waiting in line outside the office of an AIDS activist who seemed to know every openly gay man in Shelby County, cruising rest areas in the greater Memphis area, and giving away cigarettes at bus stations all over town. No one recognized Don McAllister's picture, knew his name, or seemed particularly bothered that he'd been killed.

From the work I'd done before the murder, I knew that McAllister had been an assistant manager at a Sycamore View Kroger. After I gave up haunting the local gay scene, I decided to talk to his coworkers. I spoke to the cashiers, the stock boys, the dairy manager, and the butcher, but all that anyone knew about Don McAllister was that he was never late, that he was a stickler for straight shelves, and that he ate pimento cheese on whole wheat every day for lunch.

"He was just an odd guy," the head butcher, a gray-haired man with thin lips and thick, work-scarred hands said. "We took our lunch together for ten years, and I could count the amount of words he spoke on one hand. He just sat there, eating his sandwich, reading his photography magazines, until it was time to clock back in. Don was the last man on earth you'd suspect would end up murdered."

"Photography magazines?"

"He had a slew of them. Kept them in his locker so he could read them at lunch."

"They still around?"

"Probably."

The lockers were just open storage crates with nametags. I hunkered in front of McAllister's box, pulled out a couple of dozen photography magazines, and flipped through the pages. Most of the articles were technical, way over my head and way beyond the interest of a casual photographer. A few receipts for films, lenses, photo docks, and memory cards fell out. At the bottom of the crate was another receipt, this one from the Shelby County Photography Club, for a year's membership dues. I stuck the receipt in my pocket. I wasn't sure it was the right place to start looking, but at least it was some place to start. Besides that, it was the first indication I'd found that Don McAllister had had a life before someone took it away from him.

To my surprise, the Shelby County Photography Club seemed to be

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just that. Back when I'd spent a long and very unhappy year in Vice, "Photography Clubs" served as fronts for prostitutes, nude models, and groups of pedophiles who tried to pass their perversion off as art. But the Shelby County Photography Club seemed legit. Housed in the corner space of a strip mall on the edge of Cordova, the club was clean, orderly, its walls decorated with framed black-and-white photographs taken by its members. A sign over the reception desk announced the prices for camera rentals and advertised a workshop on documentary photography that was to be held at the end of the month. I wasn't sure if I was relieved that the world seemed to be a slightly better place or disappointed that what might have been a real lead was fizzling like a wet firecracker.

The man who stepped from a back room to greet me was in his late forties or early fifties, sun-tanned, gray-haired, with very blue eyes. He wore spotless khakis, an olive-green polo shirt, John Lennon granny glasses, a thick gold wedding band, and a nametag that identified him as Blake Roberts, manager.

"Are you looking to become a member or just looking?"

I took a card from my back pocket and laid it on the desk. "I'd like to talk to you about Don McAllister."

His smile faltered. "Oh," he whispered. "Poor Don."

Fifteen minutes later, I finished a cup of very good coffee while Roberts finished praising Don McAllister's ability as a photographer, his virtue as a friend, and his overall decency as a human being. I was more than a little surprised. It wasn't just that Roberts was the first person to say something truly nice about McAllister. He was the only person I'd talked to who had anything to say about him at all.

"So he was a serious photographer," I said, cutting him off before he launched into another monologue. "It was more than just a hobby to him?"

He puckered his lips a little and then shrugged. "He had a lot of talent, a lot more than I have and a lot more than most of the professionals who teach workshops here have. But he had no interest in trying to make a living at it. I know for a fact that he turned down at least three offers to show his photographs in galleries. Photography was personal to Don."

I nodded as if I understood and thought about the police report; there hadn't been any mention of cameras or photography equipment in the evidence catalog from McAllister's house. "His cameras," I said. "Did he own them or rent them here?"

Roberts recoiled, the expression on his face the same as it would have been had I spilled my coffee on his plush white carpet. "Our equipment is strictly for amateurs. Don wouldn't have been caught dead using one of those rentals."

"Do you have any of his work here?"

His expression looked pained. "Yes," he said, his voice barely

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above a whisper.

"Could you show me?"

"I'm not sure I should. I'm not sure you'll understand."

"Why not?"

Instead of answering, he opened his desk drawer, picked up a key, and then walked out of the room, his shoulders slumped as if I'd beaten him somehow. A few minutes later, he came back, handed me a leather portfolio, and then dropped back in his desk chair.

I don't know a lot about photography, but I knew that Don McAllister had talent. His photographs throbbed with color and light. Then, as I kept flipping through the portfolio, I stopped thinking about Don McAllister's talent and focused on the subjects. Children. Every single photograph was of a child or a family with children. They were taken at municipal parks, at playgrounds and schoolyards, at Liberty Land and the Memphis Zoo, and at the River Walk Park. All of the photographs were candid, none even slightly risqué, and most seemed taken without the children or their parents being aware. I stared at the last picture in the album. It was taken at Riverside Park on a sunny afternoon. The park was packed. There were a half-dozen faces in the background but they were white noise, unimportant. Don McAllister's camera had been squarely focused on a towheaded boy of six or seven. Looking at the picture made me uneasy.

"Were all of his pictures like this?"

"Good, you mean?"

"Of children."

"Families and children, yes." He took the portfolio away from me as if I were unfit to handle it. "Can't you feel the love he expressed in those photographs?"

"He was a pedophile?"

Roberts closed his eyes. "You've no right to say that. Don was a decent, decent man."

"He was obsessed with children."

"Yes, but it wasn't dirty."

"You know that for a fact?"

"I do," he said, opening his eyes to meet mine in a challenge. "I most certainly do." He stood from behind his desk. "Everything isn't dirty, you know? You've no right to come in here and say it is."

"You're in denial about your friend."

His face reddened and his eyes bulged until I thought he was either going to leap across the desk or suffer a stroke in his effort not to. "He took those photographs because he didn't have a family of his own. That's what his art did for Don. It gave him back something he'd lost."

"He had a family. A son. He walked out on them, never went back."

"He had no choice."

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"Everybody has a choice. Sometimes it's convenient to believe we don't."

"You don't know anything, Mr. Raines. " He shut his eyes and took another deep breath. "Now, please, please, please get the hell out of my office."

"Look . . ."

"Get out!" he bellowed.

Then he started to cry. He didn't weep or wail or bawl but tears ran in a zigzagging line from beneath his glasses. I watched him for a second. Then I left, because there didn't seem to be anything else to do.

At the Union Avenue precinct, I found my way to the evidence room, bribed a desk clerk with two twenties for another look at the catalog of possessions removed from Don McAllister's home, and then went to the fourth-floor Robbery–Homicide bullpen. Elswick and Johnson shared a cubicle, their desks pressed against each other. They were lounging, Elswick drinking a Dr Pepper, Johnson eating microwave popcorn. When they saw me, they exchanged smiles as if I were a private joke between them.

"If it isn't the pot-bellied Sam Spade," Elswick said.

"Did you know that Don McAllister was a serious amateur photographer?"

They exchanged looks and then Johnson shrugged. "So what?"

"None of his cameras and equipment are in the evidence locker or in your report. Were they at the scene?"

"Listen to him," Elswick said. "He talks like a cop."

Johnson stroked his moustache. "If they were at the scene, they would have been in our report, wouldn't they?"

"Robbery might be the motive for McAllister's murder."

"You think so, huh?" Elswick finished his Dr Pepper, belched, crumpled the can, and pitched it in the trash. "You're wasting your time, Raines."

Johnson tapped a Manila folder on his desk. "Autopsy report. Pancreatic cancer, late stages."

It was my turn to ask so what.

"Mark McAllister had another motive for murder besides having his heart broken by his deadbeat dad," Johnson said.

"The kid wanted his inheritance quicker than his father wanted to die."

"How was Mark McAllister supposed to know that his father had cancer or that there was any inheritance at all? He hadn't heard from him since he was two years old."

Elswick winked at Johnson. Johnson grinned at me.

"Talk to your client, Raines."

"Meaning?"

Elswick gave me a hard look. "Meaning get the hell out of here

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and quit wasting our time."

Instead of listening to their advice, I went to Riverside Park, where the last picture in Don McAllister's portfolio had been taken. Something about that photograph troubled me and chafed at my nerves, although I didn't know why. The subject was no different from the others. Maybe it was the intensity of his focus on the little boy, a reaching desperation that seemed as vivid as the trees, the sunshine, and the shadow, or maybe it was the bland faces in the background, anonymous, unconcerned onlookers to what felt like a horrible crime.

It was nearly a perfect spring afternoon. The skies were rich blue, the clouds lazy and puffy, the breeze from the river just cool enough to take the bite out of the afternoon sun. Harried mothers sat along the edge of the playground, talking quietly to each other as throngs of children ran towards the swings, the jungle gym, and slides. A few suited and bright-faced professionals from the offices downtown drank Starbucks coffee or ate their lunches in the shade of oak trees. Lovers, young and otherwise, held hands. I showed McAllister's photograph around, asked if anyone recognized him. A few of the regulars did, but none knew his name, just that he'd come to the park to take pictures. There was no sense that anyone had been alarmed by his presence or aware that his camera lens had been focused on their children.

It was a useless trip but a gorgeous day, so I lingered in the park, enjoying the sounds of laughter, the fresh green grass, the clean smell of the air coming off the water. These days I spent most of my life in dive bars, low-rent strip clubs, grimy jails, and trash-strewn ghettos. It was nice to know that there was a different, brighter world to which I belonged. I found an empty park bench, stretched my legs, told myself for the hundredth time that I needed to get outdoors more often, start taking walks or jogging. I was still telling myself that I was going to start tomorrow when my cell phone vibrated in my pocket. My first reaction was to slap at a bug. I'd owned the phone for six months but still forgot that I had it.

"What the hell's wrong with you, Charlie?" Bernie Koskov, the attorney I'd contacted for Mark McAllister, yelled. "You forgot how to return a phone call?"

"I forgot to check my messages."

"No wonder you're a nickel away from declaring bankruptcy."

Koskov was a good friend and as good a defense lawyer as could be found in Memphis, but the man nagged even more than my ex-wife had. "What's up?"

"What's up, he asks," Koskov said. "I just wanted to thank you for throwing me a dog of a case for which I'm not going to get paid a penny. You keep it up and I'll be as poor as you."

"Tell me."

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"Our client got a heartfelt letter from his father about three weeks ago. No return address on the envelope. But you know what was inside?" He didn't wait for an answer. "A letter from Don McAllister explaining that he had cancer and only a few months to live. The letter went on to explain that our client was going to inherit a decent sum of money. There was also a certified check for three thousand dollars, good-faith money or a peace offering, I guess. That means our client had a financial motive for killing his father. It means I can't play the abandoned-son card to get him a lesser sentence, and it means that I'm going to lose a murder case, something that I never, ever do."

"Jesus."

"Him, I could have gotten off."

Then he hung up. I sat in the park another second, my face burning, feeling as stupid as I ever had in my life.

"I should have told you," Mark McAllister said. "But I figured you'd think I was guilty if I did."

I balled my hands into fists to stop myself from slapping him. "You were right."

"I ain't no saint, but I wouldn't kill my own natural father."

"The only reason you came to find him was the money."

He scratched at a scab on his knuckle. "I owed some people back home, and they weren't happy about it. These were some real tough old boys."

"How much?"

"Twenty grand." He smiled and then I really wanted to hit him. "I sort of lifted some of their product and put it to my own uses."

"Why did you punch your father? He refuse to give you the money?"

He looked down at his hands and his face reddened. "He told me he was gay," he said, his voice genuine for the first time since I'd met him. "He said that's why he left my mother. The thought of it . . . I don't know. I lost my temper."

"You went back and killed him." I held up a hand to stop him before he could spin another web of B.S. "Forget it. I'm through with you, but why me? Of all the private investigators in Memphis, why did you pick me?"

He smiled again. "Your ad in the phone book looked cheap. I thought I could afford you."

I promised myself that I was just going to stop by the Refugee for a quick beer before heading home, but I walked through the door at six o'clock and was still there when the late local news came on at ten. A quick drink had turned into a dozen slow ones, and I squinted at the fly-specked and beer-splattered television, trying to focus my eyes. The first five minutes of the news was the usual

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drone of disaster—roadside bombings in Iraq, earthquakes in Indonesia, a plane crash in Italy. Then the anchorman cut to breaking local news. Two men had been gunned down outside of a Brooks Road strip club. The cops were withholding the victims' names, but both were said to be associates of the Montesi crime family. The reporter went on to point out that these men were the latest victims in a series of murders and speculated about a brewing gang war, the first in Memphis in thirty-five years. Then the story ended. After a couple of appropriately serious headshakes, the anchorman brightened and teased a story about an Arkansas pig farmer who hit a half-million-dollar jackpot at the Horseshoe Casino down in Tunica.

I pulled myself from the barstool, lurched towards the door, decided I was too drunk to drive, and then stumbled back to the bar. I dug around in my pocket for my cell phone, finally found it, and squinted at the number of the cab company that was pinned over the cash register. One of the cocktail waitresses, a haggard-faced brunette who was twenty-five going on fifty and who'd once offered to sleep with me if I'd pay her past-due electric bill, put her hand on my shoulder and her mouth next to my ear. I shivered a little, wondering if she had more utilities that needed paying and if I were drunk enough to take her up on the offer this time.

"That little red light blinking on your phone means you have a message," she whispered in my ear.

"Oh," I said, feeling like an idiot. "Right."

Then she patted my shoulder and moved away, her hips twitching beneath her cutoff denim shorts. I squinted down at my cell phone, finally managed to push the button to listen to the message. It was from Koskov. He didn't sound any happier, and he wanted me to call. I thought about letting it wait until morning, but then I figured I might as well find out the bad news while I was drunk enough not to care.

"What did you say to Mark McAllister when you went to see him," he said instead of hello. "The kid hung himself in his cell. You know how that looks? It looks like a confession."

"McAllister's dead?"

"He might as well be. He's at Baptist Memorial, ICU, and if the little jerk survives, a jury's going to hang him." He coughed into the phone and then the coughs gave way to curses. "So far the only thing he's been able to say is 'I want Charlie Raines.' Go down there if you have to, but for God's sake, try hard not to make things worse than they are."

After he hung up, I called a cab. But I didn't go home.

Gil Brewer, rumpled, red-eyed, and coffee-stained, and a young patrol officer stood guard outside the ICU door. The patrol officer's presence wasn't a surprise, but Brewer's was, and I didn't like it.

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"New jail policy," Brewer said, scratching a red smear on his chin that might have come from a jelly doughnut. "One of ours leaves the jail, one of us has to go with him."

"I thought you worked the day shift."

"Rodriguez called in sick, menstrual cramps or some such nonsense, so I had to pull a double shift." He hooked his head toward the ICU. "Then this asshole decides to hang himself on my watch, so guess who gets to stand on his feet all night?"

"Tough world," I said, stepping past him.

He followed me into the ICU ward and parked himself beside Mark McAllister's door. The kid looked as small as a ventriloquist's dummy in the hospital bed. A half-dozen tubes and wires were connected to his nose, his mouth, and his arms, but he was awake.

"Charlie," he said, his voice a ragged hiss coming from his damaged vocal cords. "Didn't do it. Not my old man." He hissed and coughed, and the machines beeped crazily. Still, he managed to lift a hand and touch his swollen throat. "Not this, either."

"Okay," I said.

"Not this."

"Take it easy."

I didn't have to tell him twice. He shut his eyes and went to sleep.

The next morning I woke on my living-room floor, hung over, stiff, stinking like a skid-row bum. By the time I'd left the hospital, taken a cab back to the Refugee for my car, and driven home, I was sober, a condition I'd remedied by finishing the last eight beers in my refrigerator and then breaking into a bottle of Ten High bourbon. I'd sat at my kitchen table, drinking, chain-smoking Kools, my brain chasing itself in circles. Something about the day had stuck and was grating at my consciousness but I couldn't quite grasp it. Like most people who drink too much, I told myself that booze helped clarify my thinking, but I'd worked so hard at achieving clarity that I'd passed out.

Now, I smoked my first cigarette of the day while I waited for coffee to brew. When it did, I took a cautious sip, gagged, sipped again. I closed my eyes, letting everything run through my brain—the missing camera equipment, Blake Roberts's passionate defense of his friend, the photographs I'd seen in Don McAllister's portfolio, Mark McAllister's insistence that he hadn't tried to commit suicide. Then I squeezed my eyes tighter. It was the last photograph in Don McAllister's portfolio that was still bothering me. Kids on the playground. A family having a picnic. The towheaded boy, a figure of longing and desperation. But it was the faces in the background that came back to me. They were unimportant to Don McAllister. His focus and the composition made that clear. They were just faces, men and women in the park, irrelevant to him in his obsession. He was a good photographer, and his picture

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demanded that you follow his eye, his focus. Now, I shut my eyes, tried to pry my mind free of what McAllister had wanted the picture to capture. I focused on the background, saw a heavyset black woman in a bright orange blouse, an elderly man walking a terrier, a man staring at the camera with a look that was either fear or surprise. I opened my eyes. I hadn't recognized the figures in the background because I'd been too quick to latch on to the subject matter. The belief that McAllister was a pedophile had blotted everything else out. I made a phone call to an old friend who worked as a fact checker for the *Commercial Appeal* and when I hung up, I knew I'd made a mistake.

Blake Roberts had stopped crying, but it looked as if he might start again. He was sitting behind his desk with a *USA Today* open in front of him. His glasses had slipped down his nose, and his eyes were bloodshot and watery.

"You're not welcome here," he said, his voice raw but his words precise. "I made that clear yesterday."

I held up a hand to stop him. "I've come to apologize," I said, which was at least partially true. "I jumped to a conclusion I shouldn't have."

He wasn't a man accustomed to being angry and didn't seem very good at it. Still, he tried to hold on to his hostility for a little while before he gave up and slumped back against his chair.

"I can see why you thought what you did, Mr. Raines. But I can guarantee you that it was wrong."

"You cared a lot about him."

His expression grew wary. "We were friends."

"You were lovers."

He lowered his eyes. "I'm married. I have children."

"And you were in love with Don McAllister."

"No." He sagged a little further into the chair and then waved his hand dismissively. "He was a good man, courageous." He took a gulp of air. "More courageous than I could ever be. He loved his family, loved his son, but he left them because he couldn't live as someone else. I've never lived anything but a lie. You want to know how much of a coward I am?"

"It's not necessary."

He wasn't listening. "I didn't even go to his funeral. I loved the man for ten years, and I was afraid to attend his funeral because my wife might suspect that there was something between us." He wiped his mouth on the back of his hands. "He was dying. Did you know that?"

"He wrote his son."

"Don missed his family like a part of him that had been amputated. That's why he took the pictures. He was trying to capture what he'd lost when he left his son." He lifted his glasses, rubbed at

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his eyes. "Don was an artist, and if the world had been different, he would have been a great father. I knew he didn't want to die without reconciling with his son. That's why I encouraged him to write the letter." His shoulders completely crumbled and his chin bobbed to his chest. "And I got him killed, didn't I?"

"I don't think so."

He lifted his head, wiped his eyes on the back of his hand. "You don't believe his son did it?"

"I did, but now I don't think so."

"I hope that's true. You have no idea how I've blamed myself, how guilty I've felt."

"The photographs. Did he date them?"

"Most photographers do."

"Did he?"

He puffed his cheeks as if he were trying to figure out a complex equation and then nodded. "Yes, I'm certain he did."

"Bring me the portfolio."

Three hours later, I found Elswick and Johnson at the Alligator, drinking their way through their lunch hour. Elswick glared; Johnson wiped his mouth on a paper napkin, balled it up, and dropped it on a plate smeared with barbecue sauce and ketchup.

"You guys are going to have to find a new patsy," I said.

Elswick glanced at Johnson and then back at me. "Are you drunk or just stupid, Raines?"

I sat at their table, reached into the pocket of my windbreaker, clicked on a microcassette recorder, and then pulled out my pack of Kools. "Mark McAllister is going to walk for his father's murder."

"Both," Johnson said. "He's drunk and he's stupid."

"I found the kid an alibi. As it turns out, while his old man was being murdered, Mark McAllister was in the process of being robbed by a Whitehaven hooker and her pimp."

"That's a good one, Raines. You keep saying it enough times, someone might believe you."

"But not us," Elswick added.

I lit a cigarette, ignored their frowns. "Her conscience was bothering her. Hooker or not, she didn't want to see an innocent kid go down for a murder he didn't commit. She's already given her statement to Nate Randolph. Now, her pimp's a different story, a hard case who drifted into town a few weeks ago, drifted out right after the murder."

"This is crap, Raines," Elswick said.

I blew a lungful of smoke in his face. "You guys didn't find what you were looking for. You killed Don McAllister for nothing. He didn't have the photographs and had no idea what they meant anyway." I smiled. "A friend of mine blew up the picture. I could even see the latex gloves you guys wore to cover the gunpowder residue when

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you knocked off Little Vinnie's bagman at Riverside Park."

"Man, you've lost your mind," Johnson said, but neither of them made a move to walk away.

"My friend found the film, went back, developed a couple more pictures. You guys are never the stars but you're there in three of them."

"Waste of time," Elswick said. "Let's get out of here."

I snubbed my cigarette, went on as if he hadn't spoken. "With computer enhancement, I bet you could read the serial numbers on the .22 that Johnson dropped in that trash can next to the tulip bed. You seemed surprised. That's when you realized you'd been photographed, right?"

"To hell with you, Raines," Elswick said.

"Something needs to be done about corruption in the police force. You have any idea how many desk-sitters were willing to let me look at your logs when I waved around a hundred dollars?" I lit another cigarette, changed my mind, and dropped it into Elswick's glass. "You two were unaccounted for every time one of Montesi's men got robbed and killed, and you caught the McAllister case because you were the first to arrive at the scene. Just happened to be in the neighborhood, huh?" I leaned forward. "Your witness put Mark McAllister on the scene earlier. When you found him, everything fell into place." I met Elswick's clear blue eyes. "But now it's unraveling. It's not going to take a lot of leaning on Gil Brewer before he rolls over on you two for hiring him to hang Mark McAllister in his cell."

Something passed between them. I had a good idea that something was an unspoken agreement to rid the world of Gil Brewer at their first opportunity. But that was all right with me. I didn't see that the world would be any worse off with his passing.

"You think you can prove any of it, take it to Internal Affairs," Elswick said. "After they clear us, maybe we'll have a long talk with you about slander."

"Or maybe we won't bother to talk," Johnson said.

"Just stay away from Mark McAllister. The kid's a jerk, but he doesn't deserve to be framed for murder. When he gets better, let him walk away. If you do, you'll save yourselves the grief of an I.A. investigation."

"Let's pretend this crap is true, and let's say that the kid walks, you wouldn't go whispering a bunch of nonsense in Lieutenant Randolph's ear?"

"Right."

"And this photograph that doesn't exist . . ." Elswick said.

"Would stay in my lawyer's safe. We'll call it protection against any bad decision you might make."

"That's pretty good," Johnson said. "You ought to write for television."

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They stood in unison. "Thanks for your help with everything, Charlie," Elswick said. "I hate to see a case come to a dead end, but better it go Cold Case than an innocent kid spend the rest of his life in prison."

"We'll see you around," Johnson said. "Give your client our best wishes and tell him that we're sorry for the misunderstanding."

A week and a half later, I sat on a bench at the Riverside Park, smoking a cigarette and waiting. In the last couple of days, the weather had warmed and the air had gotten muggy, a reminder that summer heat was hunkering on the horizon. Still, I wore a windbreaker and sweated as I watched kids run helter-skelter through the playground. It was the kind of day that Don McAllister would have loved.

When Mark McAllister was released, Blake Roberts went with me to pick him up and drop him at the bus station. It was awkward. Roberts kept looking at the kid as if he wanted to grab him, kiss him, and remind him to eat his vegetables. McAllister didn't have a lot to say, but the sneer on his lips and the hardness in his eyes said he knew exactly what kind of relationship Roberts had had with his father. Still, when Roberts told Mark that his father had loved him, truly loved him, the kid managed to smile and shed a quick tear that I hope was genuine.

Later that evening, I finished my last two obligations to the McAllister case. The first was easy. I found Loretta Hampton trolling for tricks outside a Whitehaven nightclub, slipped her an envelope with five one-hundred-dollar bills, her price for providing Mark McAllister with an alibi. The second was harder. I spent an hour and a half sitting in my car, nipping from a half-pint of bourbon and telling myself that I wasn't going to do what I had in mind. Then I picked up an oversized envelope with Don McAllister's photographs, copies I'd made of the police logs, and the microcassette tape that I'd recorded at the Alligator. None of it was solid evidence or had a chance of holding up in court, but I was parked outside of a strip club on Brooks Road, not the hall of justice.

Now I finished my smoke, ignored frowns from a couple of health freaks who were jogging the River Walk, and then spotted the man I'd been waiting for. He looked as out of place in a park filled with toddlers and their adoring parents as the Pope would have looked in one of the strip clubs or massage parlors that the man operated. He was tall, muscled, in his early sixties. He wore jeans, a black leather jacket with studs, dark glasses, and lots of rings—a habit that had earned him his street name. Johnny Rings. I'd known him off and on for fifteen years. In that time he'd risen from a part-time bookie to captain of one of the Montesi crews.

"Nice day, huh?" he said, sitting beside me on the bench and slicking back his hairspray-stiff hair. "I need to get out of the office

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more, enjoy the weather."

He unzipped his jacket, glanced around to make sure no one was watching, and then pulled out a thick envelope and stuck it in my hand. I stuffed the envelope in my windbreaker without bothering to open it.

"Five G's," Johnny Rings said. "And Vinnie says to pass on his thanks."

"Right," I said. "I'll see you around, Johnny."

"The last guy those two jerks popped was my sister's stepson. I took it personally." He smiled a vacant smile that would have made a polar bear shiver. "And then I took care of it myself. When we got finished with Elswick and Johnson . . ."

"I don't want to know, Johnny."

He seemed offended but then relaxed. "Oh sure. Loose lips, right?" He slapped my shoulder. "You take care, Charlie. You ever need a favor, call."

Then he strutted away, his hands stuffed into the pockets of his jeans. I touched the envelope in my pocket. I hadn't tipped Montesi for the money. And as much as I would have liked to pretend that it was true, I hadn't gone to him out of a relentless desire for justice. It was a matter of survival. I'd rattled Johnson and Elswick, and sooner or later, they'd have made a move on me. I'd told Vinnie Montesi that I didn't expect money, but he'd insisted that I take a finder's fee and Little Vinnie was a man who didn't like to be told no.

Now, I patted the envelope. Just because I'd taken it, didn't mean I had to keep it. I sat on the bench for a few minutes, watching kids play and thinking what I could do with the cash to make myself feel better. I could give it to charity, drop it in a donation box at Saint Michael's or make a gift in Don McAllister's name to my friend the AIDS activist. But none of that was going to happen. I had bills to pay. In the end, Vinnie Montesi's money would spend as easily and cleanly as anyone else's.

I lit a cigarette, zipped my jacket, and headed out of the park, doing my best to ignore the wary expressions of the clean-scrubbed and bright-eyed parents I passed on my way to the car. My jacket, my bloodshot eyes, the stale whiskey sweat that seeped from my pores made me suspect, and I knew that despite the lies I told myself, I was as out of place in this bright world as Johnny Rings or Little Vinnie or Elswick and Johnson had ever been. It struck me then, no matter what the reason, if you get dirty enough, it's damn near impossible to ever get clean. Still, on my way to the car, I slapped a twenty into a panhandling bum's palm. Then I headed for the Refugee Lounge, where a tired waitress could use a tip large enough to pay an electric bill and the lights were dim enough that no one would notice a few stains that might fade with time. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

TOM WASP AND THE DOLLYSHOP

by Amy Myers

Ned would take it into his head that he must have a book.

Now this I approved of, knowing the value of such things, especially for a chimney sweeper's lad. Even Queen Victoria has a book or two, I'm sure of that. What's more, this book that he took a fancy to was the Good Book, which I have myself, although my Bible is not such a fine volume as this. When I asked Ned why he liked it, he looked anxious.

"It looks nice, Gov."

It did. Leather-bound, held together with what looked like a gold clasp, and not even the sign of a nibbling mouse. It was not the sort of thing that you'd normally find in Mrs. Guggins's dollyshop. We'd only gone there last evening because Ned's trousers had worn through, and she sells the cheapest rags in Rag Fair. To call it by its proper name, that's the Rosemary Lane area in London's East End, but its stink has nothing sweet or fragrant about it. We came

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across a brown knickerbocker suit, which looked about the right size. Ned was doubtful about it, but I told him it would go with his old stockinette brewer's cap he's so fond of. The rules about young chimney sweeps are being tightened up in this year of 1864, so he needs to look smartish. It was a penny the lot, Mrs. Guggins told us, eyes gleaming at the prospect of a sale.

"Throw the book in," I said grandly, "and we'll take it." She didn't mind. It's not often she can shift a book, even the Good One.

All the same, I felt there was something strange about this one, and sure as my name's Tom Wasp, there was. When we got back to our room, and I'd found a lucifer match to light the candle, I opened it. There, taking precedence over Genesis, was the Duke of Wessex's crest. I knew it well owing to the fact that I have the pleasure of cleaning His Grace's chimneys in Piccadilly, where that nasty-looking lion on his coat of arms watches you every step you tread, as if he'd gobble you up for a speck of soot. I knew the duke isn't one for giving away anything (even the tuppence I was rightfully due for the extra chimneys he makes me clean) so I would have known this book was stolen even if I hadn't heard the patterer on the Ratcliffe Highway shouting out the news of a big robbery in Wessex House a few days ago.

What puzzled me was that the book was just lying there, the crest visible to anyone who opened it. Usually stolen goods are christened first, meaning that all identifying marks are removed. Mrs. Guggins's dollyshop might look at first like an honest pawnbroker's, but there are no three balls hanging outside to indicate that. It does its best to hide its face, for it has no licence. Dollyshops cater for the very poorest of folks, often defrauding those who pawn their vital possessions in the hope of finding the dosh to buy them back in due course. Dollyshops all too often have another role, too. They deal in stolen goods, but usually Mrs. Guggins's showed no signs of that, stinking hole though it is.

Mostly the Fair consists of honest street sellers, trading in all manner of things but chiefly secondhand clothes, some on barrows, some without. The Fair spreads into the side streets off Rosemary Lane, too, where those who aren't so bothered about the honest bit tend to trade. Mrs. Guggins is one of them; her dollyshop is hidden in Blue Anchor Yard, where she trades from the ground floor of her house.

The appearance of this new Tom Wasp story is timely, for the first novel in the series saw print just a few months ago. See *Tom Wasp and the Murdered Stunner* (Five Star Press). Before she became a full-time writer, Ms. Myers worked as a director of a London publishing firm where she edited memoirs and fiction titles that included ghost stories and romances. Look for an Auguste Didier story by this author next month!

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Mr. Guggins was only in evidence as a familiar figure weaving his way back to the dollyshop after a good session at the Paddy Goose or some other hostelry in London's dockland. He was an evil-looking man, hunched and bent, with a way of studying the ground until you passed by. Then his head would shoot up, glaring malevolently, as though he'd like to meet you by night down by the docks with a knife in his hand and no questions asked.

"Tomorrow we take that book back, Ned," I said firmly. "No use having a Good Book if it's got by evil means. You'd be foolish to keep it."

Ned looked torn. He knows from his Sunday school that Our Lord has his eye on those that steal, but on the other hand he always hopes it's temporarily shut.

Next morning we set off for the Fair on our way to our first job. It was early yet and only the oyster and hot chestnut sellers were plying their trade in Rag Fair. Another few hours and you wouldn't be able to move for old petticoats, shawls, and broken-down boots. Mind you, chimney sweeps such as I, Tom Wasp, can always move onwards owing to our smell. The folks we pass are only too anxious for us to be on our way, and the Red Sea parts like it did for Moses.

Even Moses would have been taken aback at what we found today, though. Two solid policemen were guarding the door into Mrs. Guggins's dollyshop, which was strange since they usually give this place a wide berth. Our eyes were fixed not on them, however, but on Mrs. Guggins. It would be hard not to, because of her howl. It filled the street, it chilled our bones with its stridency. We could see her standing in the doorway. Her sturdy body rocked and the greasy curls under the dirty white bonnet she always wore shook as she wailed. Time and time again came the cry:

"Guggins 'as gawn."

Mrs. Guggins could never have been a pretty woman, nor a dainty one, but I respect grief, so I wondered what was amiss. Then out of the shop came another policeman, one I recognised. It was Sergeant Peters, who owes me a favour or two, as I've obliged him in the past when he needed help with villains.

"Where's Guggins gone?" I asked him with interest.

"Hell, most like," answered Peters soberly. "There he is. Dead for an hour or two."

He pointed to the dim interior of the shop, made all the darker by the mass of clothing stacked from floor to ceiling. No more Paddy Goose for Mr. Guggins. There lay his dead body, hunched on the floor. I took off my stove hat in respect, as we went in, though the look the sergeant gave me suggested there was no need.

He'd been knifed, had Mr. Guggins. I could see the congealed blood on his clothes, and particularly round the wound in his chest. I sent Ned outside, not because he's squeamish over dead bodies, but because I needed a quiet word without flapping ears.

"Knife left in the wound, was it?" I asked the sergeant.

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"No."

"Body like that when it was found, was it?"

"So she says." Sergeant Peters indicated Mrs. Guggins, now weeping noisily onto a constable's shoulder. I might seem unsympathetic when I mention Mrs. Guggins, but she shows no milk of human kindness to the poor folk who can't afford to redeem their possessions. Not a penny less, not a penny late, is her motto. All the same, Our Lord reminded me, Mr. Guggins was her husband, and two villains can love as truly as two angels.

"That's a puzzle," I remarked, lowering my voice in case Mrs. Guggins heard. "When the knife was pulled out, there would have been blood everywhere, yet there's precious little to be seen on the floor here." I'd seen a matelot stabbed before my eyes down by the docks and knew what I was talking about.

We both stared at the filthy floor and I noticed an interesting fact, just as the van arrived to take the body to the police mortuary and we had to break off. After it left, I could hear Mrs. Guggins's mournful voice outside, relating her sad tale yet again.

"Not killed in this spot then?" I said casually to the sergeant, looking pointedly at the blobs of dried blood at intervals on the floor.

I knew he wasn't, but it gave the sergeant a chance to shine.

"It's my belief, Mr. Wasp," he said loudly, "that he was killed elsewhere and his body dragged here. But where from?"

We followed the blobs of dried blood just discernible in the general grime, but then we had to stop. We and the blobs had ended at a stack of clothes piled almost to ceiling height and stacked against a wall.

"I wonder," said I, "what's behind that wall?" I made it sound innocent, but I knew for sure then why no one had ever seen much of Mr. Guggins, save at public houses. Sergeant Peters took my meaning at once.

"Here," he roared to Mrs. Guggins, whose hand flew to her breast as if she was Cleopatra. "What's behind this wall?"

Mrs. Guggins seemed fully restored to health as she threw herself towards us, having seen the sergeant rummaging in the pile of clothes. He pulled a covering curtain back triumphantly to reveal a trolley under the heap, so that the whole pile could be wheeled aside. I put myself between her and Sergeant Peters, who had now heaved the trolley aside to reveal a door.

"Get out," she howled. "It ain't respectful. That's Guggins's room and Guggins 'as gawn."

Even as she spoke, however, the door was thrust open in our faces from the far side and we had to leap back. Mr. Guggins's room had a guard, it seemed, for we were face to face with Big George, who seemed equally horrified to see us. Everyone round here knows about Big George. The biggest villain and biggest *man* in London (over six foot five inches high and several solid feet wide). One look at a lock from him and it springs open.

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"What are you doing here, George?" asked the sergeant, squaring up to him, despite the fist produced in his face. He is, of course, most familiar with the gentleman, as I am myself, though I keep my distance.

"Only after what's mine by right," he snarled.

Big George, having removed the fist once he realised it was the law he was addressing, then tried to make a run for it through the rear door. With the help of Mrs. Guggins he was first floored, then struggled up again to have the cuffs put on him. I hobbled over to have a look at this door—I've hobbled since childhood owing to my trade. It opened into a tiny yard with the usual stinking privy and pile of coal, but interestingly there was a gate. The dollyshop is on the corner where Blue Anchor Yard leads through to Glasshouse Street, thus providing a most useful second entrance for the Gugginses.

"I want what's mine by right," Big George growled sadly from his lofty heights, as I went back inside.

"It's only wrong I see here," Sergeant Peters replied wittily.

What I then saw made me speechless. So this was where Guggins had worked. He'd been a fence, receiving stolen goods, and that was the real trade of the dollyshop, although Mrs. Guggins sold a few bits and bobs outside to look respectable. Here Mr. Guggins, in-between trips to the Paddy Goose (where he could meet customers and do business without suspicion), had reigned over a palace. Fancy silks, posh china, silver, snuffboxes, jewellery everywhere we looked. Her Majesty herself would be proud to entertain here. The only thing she would not have liked was the dried blood on the desk and floor.

"What made you suspect this, Mr. Wasp?" asked the sergeant, who is young enough to be respectful to me.

"A book," I told him, "with the Duke of Wessex's crest, had not been christened, so it struck me there must be other swag and the book got dropped by mistake." I began to look at some of the articles in the late Mr. Guggins's possession, but to my surprise could see none with the crest of the Duke of Wessex. Christening fine ware takes time, and in this case, I supposed, it was so hot that Guggins would have been anxious to be rid of it.

"What have you done with it, George?" I asked, having pointed out the problem to the sergeant. I was feeling brave with all these police around, and hoping that George wouldn't recognise me by the time he was out of jug (one sooty face being much like another).

Big George's face went an interesting shade of red.

"Wessex House," the sergeant added, as if he didn't know. "A burglary there a week ago. You got a good haul, didn't you?"

"Nothing to do with me," Big George said complacently, secure in the knowledge that there was nothing in this room that could be traced back to him.

"Then what are you doing in Guggins's room?" asked the sergeant.

The complexities of puzzling out this trap were too much for Big

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George. "Business," was all he could growl.

"When did you get here?"

"What's the time now?" We looked at a rather fine clock that might one day be restored to its rightful owner. It was a quarter to eight.

"Just got here. Came in the back like he always said. Don't know nothing."

"Turn your pockets out, George," instructed Sergeant Peters.

This was a difficult task with his hands cuffed so I had to assist, much to his fury. Out came three elegant snuffboxes.

"Mine," he growled. "I've a fancy for snuff."

"Tell that to the judge," said the sergeant smartly.

Big George paled. "Look, it ain't fair. I come here at five for me money, like old Guggins told me. I'd sold him some—well, some old clothes, and he said he'd have it ready by then, but he only gave me five quid. No honesty around nowadays. Mean old skinflint. Said it was fake. A man can't make an honest living nowadays. I've got a wife and children to keep."

I wondered how secondhand clothes could be fake, but decided to keep silent.

"Mr. Guggins wouldn't cheat no one," said his wife faintly.

"Done what by five?" Sergeant Peters enquired.

"Guggins had customers coming." Big George was getting sullen now, obviously resenting being cuffed. "When I gets there, I said that five quid weren't enough, and he says the deal's not finished yet, so come back in an hour or so for the rest. So back I comes at sixish, but no one around, so I comes back yet again—and look what I gets from you. Cuffed." He displayed his hands on high, in appeal to a Higher Justice.

"And who might these customers have been, Mrs. Guggins?"

"How should I know?" Most indignant she looked. "I don't know nothing about what went on in here. You coulda knocked me down with a feather when you opened this door." (Unlikely, I felt.) "I was asleep all night," she continued. "Had a nice glass of hot milk and slept like a baby."

Her colouring suggested several glasses of neat gin were her usual tipple.

"Guggins, poor love," she blew her nose delicately on her sleeve, "he worked all night sometimes, so I never saw him, not till I saw his body when I opened up this morning. Fancy all this stuff being back here—" She did an impressive job of looking amazed at the splendour around her— "Well I never, he must have been saving it for my birthday present."

"Who'd he sell to, Mrs. Guggins?" Sergeant Peters went on relentlessly.

I was getting most interested in the late Mr. Guggins's trade, and even Ned had crept back in through the open door. I don't blame him. By now I could hear stalls being set up outside. The oyster sell-

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ers would be going on their way a-whistling, and the clothes dealers were taking their places. You could live your whole life in Rosemary Lane without going anywhere else. Goods and food—you can find everything you could ever want here. You could pay your way for it by honest toil on the stalls, or by dishonest dipping in the pockets of the strangers who come here in the hope of picking up a bargain.

Strangers, now that was a thought.

"Mrs. Guggins," said I, "these customers Mr. Guggins was expecting. They can't be from round here. They couldn't sell the duke's stuff in the Fair, they'd need to sell it to gentry, and not the gentlemen of Piccadilly either, for they'd know the duke's crest by sight. So who were they? Must have been special to come in the night and not deal in the Paddy Goose. No risk to you in telling us."

"Only in not telling us," Sergeant Peters added, getting the idea nicely.

Even so, Mrs. Guggins decided to bewail her loss again, in order to avoid answering this question of mine. "Guggins was a good—" she began, but the sergeant has a way of getting his message through. He rattles the cuffs, which is a most powerful persuader in these parts. Mrs. Guggins breathed heavily. "They come here by night," she told us. "I don't see them."

"Seems to me you don't see anything unless you choose to," observed Sergeant Peters, with another rattle. "See these?"

"John Clode," she says quickly. "John Clode and Flirty Fan."

"And who might they be?"

That surprised me. I thought everyone knew Flirty Fan at least, for all she lives across the water Rotherhithe way. She has a business in the better parts of Blackheath and Lewisham. She's far too choosy to flirt with a chimney sweep, but she's a sight for sore eyes when she flounces by. Makes a day of it, she does, when she comes through the tunnel over this way, and by nights she does her illegal business, so I'm told. She's as thin as a stewed eel and just about as slippery. She does herself up grand, with bonnets covered in plumes and feathers, jangling her bracelets and necklaces, flaunting her silks and satins and wriggling along, all bustles and mincing little bootees. She puts on every bit of gaudiness she can find to attract custom—which is both in goods and in men. So eager she is, I've seen her work her way round Billingsgate fish market to find a man. She's a shrewd barterer, though, and if Guggins tried to cheat her last night, she could have turned nasty.

Mrs. Guggins was much briefer in her description of Flirty Fan to Sergeant Peters. "A whoring bitch," she snarled.

"And Mr. John Clode?" asks the sergeant.

A simper now. "He's a Frenchie. Most polite, though. Naturally, I don't know what business he could have had with Mr. Guggins."

"I do," growled Big George.

"But so polite," Mrs. Guggins persisted desperately. " 'Oh, Mrs.

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Guggins,' says he, 'would that I could sail on the evening tide to the belle France with the belle Mrs. Guggins.' "

"Would that be," Sergeant Peters asked quietly, "Mr. Jean-Claude Lepin, the well-known receiver of stolen goods in Paris?"

"Could be," said the belle Mrs. Guggins guardedly.

"Seen by the river police entering the country in a small craft up the Thames last evening?"

"Might be."

"And no doubt trying to leave again at this very moment with a boatload of stolen goods?"

"Can I come, Gov?" pleaded Ned.

A day had gone by, and I was most surprised when a police van called for me early the next morning. I could tell it was the police by the way everyone had scattered in our court, which is well shielded from the road by a narrow entrance between the lodging houses down which this policeman must have made his way very cautiously. Usually there were folks around at the pump, but now the yard was empty. Who was scared of who? I wondered. The policeman looked at me warily as I answered the thump on my door.

"You chimney sweep Wasp?"

It must have been obvious, but I agreed that I was.

"Orders to take you to the sergeant."

I had no objection, as my interest in the means by which Mr. Guggins had gone was growing, and if Ned wished to come too, why not?

"Is he under sixteen?" asked the policeman suspiciously.

I sighed. Ned is about thirteen or fourteen, not sure which, since he never knew his age, but the new law says if he's under sixteen he has to wait outside the house while I do the hard work cleaning the chimneys inside. As if any young lad wouldn't choose waiting outside given the chance. Sometimes the good men who reform the law put one thing right only to cause another injustice. I have a hard time lugging my machine up all those stairs without help, and Ned longs to help, but we daren't risk it.

"Yes, I am," Ned pipes up. "But it was my Good Book, so I'm a witness."

"That's true, Ned. You come along then," I told him, and the constable said no more. After all, we weren't off to sweep a chimney. Not a real one, anyway.

Apparently we weren't going to the police station, as I'd expected, but to Blue Anchor Yard again. No doubt Sergeant Peters had his reasons. We were escorted into Guggins's room once more, where the sergeant was sitting in Guggins's chair looking very important. I was amused to see Flirty Fan perched on the desk doing her best to entice him with a glimpse of her filthy red petticoat. She didn't stand a chance, and she must have known it because she then

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looked hopefully at the constable who'd brought us here. He promptly backed away.

Big George was at the party too, and so would half of Rag Fair have been, judging by the curious faces we'd seen as we came in. The front door had been closed and locked behind us, though. This made the smell of old clothes so strong I could see Peters blenching. Mrs. Guggins was sitting in an armchair together with a small weasely gentleman who occasionally patted her hand as she glared at Fan. The weasely gentleman must be John Clode, or rather Monsieur Jean-Claude Lepin. He had sallow skin and a moustache, and was so skinny he could have gone up chimney flues in his youth, though I doubt if this canny gentleman had ever had to do so. He lives by his wits, not his weight, I thought.

"So here we all are," Sergeant Peters began genially.

I was puzzled at first as to why I was included, but then I remembered he'd once said to me: "We police have to look at what's before us, Mr. Wasp. You can see what's hidden in the chimneys of life."

Very poetic, I thought that was. Chimneys are full of dark secrets and sudden turns. You come to expect them after a while, and can deal with them, so I wondered if that was what he wanted from me now.

Ned sat down on a pile of old stays and petticoats in the open doorway to the shop, as happy as a sandboy and as quiet as a mouse. He was still clutching that book, though, and I decided I should keep my eye on it if His Grace was ever to see it again.

"Mr. Guggins was probably murdered between about five and six o'clock yesterday morning," Sergeant Peters informed us. "Miss Fan, Mr. Lepin, and you, George, you all three of you saw him during the night." George still had his cuffs on, I noticed, whereas the others hadn't, so his chances didn't look good.

"Poor Guggins," shrieked his widow, but she was ignored.

The Frenchie piped up very quickly. "I come with Miss Fanny at four of the clock. I here for half an hour while we trade very hard. I win, Miss Fanny lose. Then I go. Leave her here." A triumphant look at Flirty Fan. French chivalry doesn't seem to go very deep in such circumstances.

"Yeah, you went without the jewellery though, all the good stuff. You thought you'd got it, didn't you?" Flirty Fan jeered. "Mr. Guggins knew I got taste, though. I'd no reason to kill him. I reckon you found out he hadn't given it to you with the rest of the stuff and came back for it, found it was gone, and gave him what for."

Big George suddenly woke up, nodding his huge head furiously. "I got back here about sixish, and bumped into this squid out in the backyard. He'd just killed Guggins, that's what he done. That's why he didn't answer my knock." He looked very pleased with himself for thinking this out.

"My dear Guggins," Mrs. Guggins moaned, having another shot

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at the limelight, not wishing to be left out.

"Lies!" cried the Frenchie. "I have no reason to kill dear Mr. Guggins. I come back to tell him how pleased I am with what he give me."

"Make the most of it," barked Sergeant Peters. "It's going back to His Grace."

"In good faith I buy it," Mr. Lepin told us indignantly.

"And now you'll be losing it. English law here, you know."

"Mr. Guggins tell me these are goods that people bring in to pawn and not buy back."

"I don't see the Duke of Wessex popping down to Rag Fair to pawn his best belongings," the sergeant rightly said. "I reckon Miss Fan's right. You realised you'd not got all the jewellery you paid for, so came rushing back for the rest of it, and there was a fight."

"Me? *Mon dieu, non.* Fight? I faint at blood."

"But not if stolen goods are at stake, eh?" the sergeant said.

"*Non.* She killed him, after I left Guggins. She upset at his preferring my offer."

Flirty Fan turned ugly then and informed the Frenchie that he was a flash duffer. She was inclined to go further, but Sergeant Peters stopped this. "So you took this stolen jewellery, Miss Fanny?"

"Me? Of course not?" She rolled her eyes and fluttered her eyelashes at him, now that she was in the limelight. "I came solely to see my dear Mr. Guggins, not to buy stolen property. But if any jewellery has by chance fallen into my bag by mistake, you shall have it back immediately."

"Thank you, Miss Fanny. We've already got it. We searched your shop and found it."

Flirty Fan forgot to remember she was supposed to be alluring. "Filthy pigs," she yelled. "Guggins only wanted my body; he was lost in lust for me. 'Fan,' he said, 'you're a luscious piece of flesh, my dear. Come here and I'll show you something that will suit you just splendidly.' "

"Liar!" roared Mrs. Guggins, now fully in the picture again. "You forced yourself on him, you tart."

I could believe that very well, but the sergeant put an end to it, being intent on getting back to business. "Row over the price, did you, Fanny? Then you killed him?"

"No," she screamed. "And it's fake, if you must know, not Wessex's stuff. Guggins told me it was Wessex's, which he had christened, but it weren't. It was rubbish."

"So you killed him there and then."

"No, I bloody didn't. I didn't find out till I was nearly at the river, then I turns round and comes back for my money. Came in through the back entrance about half-past five and he was alive and kicking then. That's when he thought he'd take my body, like the wicked lecher he was. I told him he couldn't have it, and to hand over my money. Which he did, and I went."

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"Like hell he did," Mrs. Guggins observed, probably correctly. "He never gave money back. My poor Guggins. Dead, poor Guggins gawn."

And then it was Big George's turn to take centre stage. "Guggins diddled you over the money, did he, George?" said the sergeant. So you came back at sixish, he wouldn't give you any more money, so you killed him?"

" 'Course I didn't kill him," he yelled. "He didn't answer no door. You saw me yourself later. Why should I come back if I'd already killed him? Don't make sense."

"Looking for the money, maybe," the sergeant suggested.

In the end, the sergeant gave up and arrested all three of them for receiving stolen property. It was hard to tell where there was the most racket, from Rag Fair with its cries of "Fried fish, lovely fried fish," or the three of them bawling their heads off about how innocent they were. So the sergeant turned to me and said: "Perhaps, Mr. Wasp, you might do some thinking in that way of yours. It seems to me that you might climb a chimney that I can't."

Nowadays, my cleaning machine does it all for me, but I said I'd certainly put in a bit of thought. I bought a pie for supper to share with Ned. He liked it, and it sharpens my brain nicely.

I sat that evening staring at my own chimney after Ned had shut his eyes for the night, and thought about it as I'd promised. It was puzzling as to who was lying. As I saw it, Flirty Fan and the Frenchie arrived at four o'clock. The Frenchie leaves with what he thinks is the entire haul, so let's say half-past four. Flirty Fan negotiates her own haul of jewellery and is gone by five o'clock when Big George turns up to collect his share of the dosh as Burglar in Chief. He's told to come back later, but in the interval Flirty Fan comes back to pick a fight with Guggins or to flutter her eyelashes at him. She leaves and awhile later, about six, back comes the Frenchie, very cross at being swindled. He can't make Guggins answer the door and nor can Big George when he comes.

So which of those sootbags killed him and dragged the body through to the other room? Which one was lying? Could have been the Frenchie coming back and killing him just before six, could have been Flirty Fan half an hour earlier, or it could have been George. If I were a betting man, I thought, I'd say it was the Frenchie. It's my belief that they haven't forgiven us yet for beating old Boney at Waterloo. Yet somehow I couldn't see him having the spunk. Flirty Fan now, or Big George, either of them would sink a knife in your guts without a quiver, if they thought they could get away with it.

I began to doze, though I tried to keep awake, otherwise by morning I'd still be stuck up Sergeant Peters's chimney.

"Guv," came a sleepy voice sometime later, jerking me awake, "what are you doing?"

"Just thinking, Ned."

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I went over to him where he lay on the floor and tucked our tuggy cloth around him for warmth. As I did so, I saw that blessed book hidden in the folds. He'd brought it back, instead of handing it over to the law.

"What's that, Ned?" I said sternly.

"It's my book, Gov." A silence, then: "You won't go to hell, will you, Gov?"

I was taken aback. Me? Why should Ned think that? "I hope not, Ned," I said cautiously, not being able to think of anything I'd done to deserve that recently.

It all came out in a rush then. "But you said I'd be foolish if I kept it, but I did, and when I looked at my book it said that if you call someone a fool you're in danger of hellfire."

"That don't apply to chimney sweeps," I comforted him, as I went back to my fireside.

I must have dozed off again, because I thought I saw Big George coming for me, but he stopped and said he didn't do it. Flirty Fan was trying to win my favours, and Mr. Weasel Lepin was trying to steal from my pockets when he thought I wasn't looking. Mr. Guggins himself seemed to be directing the traffic, telling me what to do, though not who did it. Then he disappeared into hellfire and the flames roared up. By then I knew the answer, however, and I must have slept peacefully because I woke up with the birds and Ned's Good Book as my pillow.

I went to the police station early that morning and asked for Sergeant Peters, who came eagerly in to see me. "Who is it then, Mr. Wasp? Big George?"

"No," I said. "Not him."

"Flirty Fan. I knew it," said he.

"Not her."

"So it's the Frenchie?"

"Not him either."

"Who then?"

"Mrs. Guggins," I replied. "She came down in the night and heard Guggins's lecherous talk to Flirty Fan and fancied they were having a go in there. Then she heard Flirty Fan go out and so, being a touch over the top with gin, swept in to have a go at Mr. Guggins brandishing the knife."

"How do you reckon that, Mr. Wasp?" asked the sergeant admiringly (or so I like to think).

"She had to make sure someone found that body, but not in Guggins's room, full of that lovely stolen loot. So that meant pulling the body through that door into her part of the dollyshop. Flirty Fan, Big George, and the Frenchie all came in through the rear door and couldn't have pushed that door open to get the body through because of the stuff behind it. Only she could have opened it from her side. Hell, Sergeant Peters, hath no fury like a woman scorned." ●

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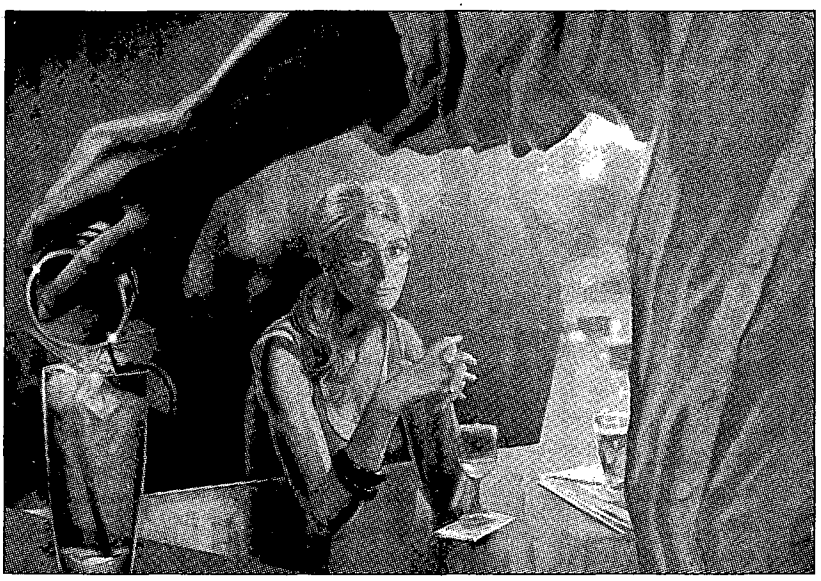

Art by Mark Evans

THE PIG PARTY

by Doug Allyn

I was working hotel security at the Ponchartrain in Detroit, taking a break in the third-floor bar, when her face flashed on the overhead TV. Sara Silver, the network correspondent with a career as brilliant as her name. She was interviewing Kathy Bates on a news show. Noticing my stare, the guy next to me followed my gaze up to the tube.

"Beauty and the beast," he quipped, sipping his scotch.

"Yeah? Which one is which?" I asked. Which earned me a look. Kathy Bates is a great actress but she's no head-turner. "I went out with her once," I explained.

"Who? Kathy Bates?"

"No, the media babe, Sara Silver."

He started to scoff, but a glance my way changed his mind. I'm not gorilla size, but I'm big enough. And life's scuffed me up some.

"No kidding, you really dated Sara Silver?" he said, doubtfully. "Where did you take her? Las Vegas?"

"Nope, to a frat party. Roughest night of my life."

"I'll bet," he said, pointedly turning back to his scotch. I knew what he was thinking. A small-time hotel dick dating Sara Silver? Tell me another one.

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Doug Allyn's astonishing success in the field of short mystery fiction is nowhere more apparent than at *EQMM*, where he has won a record eight Readers Awards. He joins us this month with a character we haven't seen before, in a case that involves a college party gone wrong. Mr. Allyn and his wife are Michiganers and musicians who, until recently, played the clubs in their part of the state.

I didn't bother. He wouldn't believe me anyway. But it happened to be the truth. I really did trip the light fantastic with Sara Silver once, on the wildest night of my life. Only it wasn't a date, exactly.

Because I didn't ask her out. She asked me.

I wasn't a detective then. Just an ex-dogface, a couple of years out of the Marine Corps, taking a few college courses, trying do decide what to be when I grew up.

Meanwhile, I helped pay my rent by bartending part-time at Shannon's Irish Pub, a sports saloon just off the Westover College campus in Lansing. A jumpin' joint, Shannon's, foosball tables, pool tables, and pinball machines. Busy all day long, totally nuts at night.

Preppies would start popping in at noon to knock down a beer between classes, shoot pool, or line the bar for the usual intellectual collegiate repartee; Freud and Kant, easy A's and easy lays.

Occasionally I'd have to eighty-six a kid who overdid it, but for the most part the college boys were pretty mellow.

Their women were even better. Coeds and townie girls prowled Shannon's like tigresses around a waterhole, scouting for upwardly mobile mates. But sometimes they'd settle for an affable bartender.

The first time I saw Sara Silver, I figured she was just another Westover babe on the hunt. Sat at the far end of the bar, away from the others, nursing a white wine spritzer. Attractive, but nowhere near the network knockout she is now.

Her blond hair drawn back in a loose ponytail, held by a silver clip. Fine-boned features, slim legs, her figure tomboy taut but unmistakably feminine. Her oversized glasses gave her a studious look. Figured she was waiting for an intense, long-haired type with wild eyes and wilder politics.

Wrong. She was looking for me.

"You're Tommy Malloy, right? The ex-Marine?"

"Guilty," I said, sliding a napkin under her glass. "Do I know you?"

"Sara Silver," she said, keeping her voice down, making sure we weren't overheard. "I've been asking around. I understand you tend bar for a lot of fraternity parties."

"I do my share."

"Have you ever worked a Delta Omega party?"

"Once. And not recently. Why? Do you want to hire a bartender?"

"Not exactly," she said, meeting my eyes. "I need a date."

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"I don't understand."

"There's a party at Delta Omega tonight. I need an escort to get in. Can you manage that?"

"Probably, but I've got a better idea. Let's make it dinner and a movie instead."

"I'm not looking for a boyfriend, Malloy, just somebody to get me into the Delta House party. Tonight. Are you interested or not?"

"Miss, I'd love to take you out. Sometime. But not to a Delta House bash, and *definitely* not tonight." It was my turn to glance around to be sure we weren't overheard. "It's a pig party," I whispered.

"I know."

"Really? Do you have any idea what that means?"

"Of course."

"I doubt that. Pig-party rules say the frat boys have to bring the ugliest chicks they can find. You don't remotely qualify."

"Thanks very much. I still want to go."

"No, you don't, damn it! Listen, it's a really ugly scene, and I'm not just talking about the girls. It's loud, lewd, and crude. Everybody drinks too much, the guys are jerks, the girls are desperate—"

"Sounds like you've been there."

"No way," I said. "It's not my trip. But bartenders hear things, and some of them aren't pretty. A pig party's a rough, sorry-ass spectacle. It's definitely not a party you want to crash."

"I'll pay you an even hundred bucks to get me in," she said, digging into her purse, carefully counting five tens out on the bar. "Fifty now, fifty more afterward."

I made no move to pick up the money. "Why? What's so important?"

"I write for the *Westover Wildcat,* the college paper."

"Sara Silver," I said, nodding slowly. "I thought your name sounded familiar. You did a story last semester on fake IDs. Burned some local bartenders."

"I hope you weren't one of them."

"Nope, I'm always super careful. But why bother with a story on a pig party? It may be sophomoric, but it's a campus tradition. The Delts hold one every year. Most of the girls who attend know the score and it's no crime to throw a bash."

"Isn't it? There's a rumor that a girl was gang raped at a pig party. Have you heard anything about that?"

"I've picked up the same rumor. As wild as the pig parties get, I suppose it's possible. Which is one more reason why you shouldn't go."

"I'll be perfectly safe," she said mildly. "I'll be with a Marine."

Touché. Couldn't help smiling. She was not only pretty, she knew exactly which buttons to push. And I was already more interested in the girl than the money.

"Ex-Marine," I said, picking up the fifty. "Where do we meet?"

We almost didn't. Westover is a small suburban college outside

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Lansing. Enrollment's twenty thousand, give or take. The main campus dates from the 'sixties, red brick buildings designed to look older than they are, surrounded by student dorms, which are coed, plus a dozen fraternities and sororities which are not.

Silver lived at the Kappa Rho House, a converted Victorian box with a mansard roof that looked like something out of *Jane Eyre.* Kappa Rhos are ultra-bright, scholarship chicks, mostly shrill feminists. We don't see many in Shannon's and I nearly missed Sara Silver. She was sitting on a bench in the vestibule and I walked right past without giving her a second look.

"Hey, big fella," she said, standing up. "Wanna go to a party?"

I did a double take. "Holy jeez Louise," I said.

Most girls fix themselves up for a date. Sara had fixed herself down. Way down. She'd rinsed her fair hair dark, leaving it flat as a cat after a cloudburst, lank and skanky. Her makeup was backwards, too. No lipstick, no rouge. Instead, she'd darkened her brows till they looked like caterpillars perching on her zit-dotted forehead. Purple smudges beneath her eyes gave her a haggard, anorexic look.

Her smile was the finishing touch. Braces by Bela Lugosi, a tangled contraption of wires and rubber bands that gave her everted lips. Not the kissable kind. More like a carp.

"Well, how do I look?" she asked brightly, automatically checking herself in the hall mirror. "Think they'll let me in?" And in that moment, she looked so vulnerable that I swallowed, hard. Women rely on their looks far more than men. What she'd done to herself took a ton of guts.

"You look . . . stunning, miss," I said, offering her my arm. "My Jeep awaits. Shall we go?"

Delta Omega is a rich frat, mostly scholarship jocks and legacy residents. A four-story faux English manor with front and rear decks, it's the largest house in Westover's Fraternity Row. And it was pumping. As I pulled into the circular drive, the house and grounds were lit up like a movie set in the autumn dusk, the thump of music pulsing in the air like a party-hearty heartbeat.

The driveway and parking lot were already jammed. No problem. I just drove my CJ-7 up over the curb and parked on the lawn next to a half-dozen other jalopies.

"Come on," I said, climbing out. "The major action's around in back."

Sara'd worn a loud, flowered blouse chosen for shapelessness, cutoff jeans, and garish wedge heels so tall she wobbled when she walked. I was dressed campus casual, golf shirt and slacks. Wore my hair shaggy in those days, a reaction to four years of buzz cuts.

Security for the party consisted of a single campus cop stationed at the gate of the picket fence surrounding the backyard. He knew me from Shannon's, but he checked Sara's ID, rolling his eyes at me as he waved us through.

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Thunderous jams were thumping from a wall of speakers stretched across one end of the tennis court. Banquet tables on the veranda were stacked with finger food but most of the activity centered around the portable bar, where white-jacketed barmen were doling out beer and mixed drinks in paper cups with slick efficiency. Again, they knew me but checked Sara's ID before serving us, a wine highball for Sara, a double scotch for me.

We both stood at the rail, nursing our drinks, taking in the scene.

At first glance, the party didn't seem much wilder than the usual Delta House bash on a rough night. The tennis court was crowded with milling dancers, showing a lot more energy than grace. Most frat boys took the "pig" part literally, plenty of heavy-duty mamas shakin' their chubby booties.

In the lighted swimming pool, a noisy water-volleyball game was in full splash. Strip volleyball: Muff a point, shuck your shirt, blouse, shoes, something. A few players were already down to their underwear and the game was still in the low teens.

Following Sara through the crowd, I realized she had a mini camera concealed in her palm. She was surreptitiously taking candid photos every time she pretended to sip her wine.

A drunk goosed Sara's butt as he passed. Annoyed, I reached for him, but she grabbed my arm, pulling me back.

"Cool it, Malloy. No trouble. Yet."

"We may get it whether we want it or not," I grumbled. "Most of these clowns are already half smashed."

"Can you blame them? Check out their dates. No wonder they call it a pig party."

"No offense, lady, but you're not exactly primped for prime time yourself."

"Thanks for noticing," she said acidly. "The difference is, I worked damned hard to look this bad. These porkers are trying to look their pathetic best. Come on, dance with me."

Not a request, an order. Taking my arm, she hauled me into the swirling crush of the tennis court without waiting for a reply. I'm no Fred Astaire, but the action on the floor was so frantic I found myself dancing in self-defense. And managed not to embarrass myself, I thought.

Not that Sara noticed. She was dancing strictly on autopilot, her moves totally disconnected from the urban rap raging from the speakers. Seemed much more interested in scanning the crowd than grooving to the rhythm of the music. Fortunately we didn't suffer for long. The DJ punched up an old B.B. King blues grind, and things got simpler. I usually enjoy slow dancing. I've always considered it romantic, even with a stranger. Maybe more so with a stranger.

But not with Sara. When she snuggled against my shoulder, there was nothing seductive about it. She was slyly snapping pictures as we danced, scanning the crowd between shots, steering me around

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the dance floor like a wheelbarrow to get the photos she wanted.

"Take it easy," I murmured, "we've got all night."

"Actually, we haven't," she said, leading me off the floor before the song ended, still scanning the crowd.

"Why not?"

"Because I've enjoyed as much of this as I can stand!" she snapped. "You were right, Malloy, this is wretched."

"Don't dally on my account. If you want to split, let's go."

"Not quite yet," she said, checking her watch. "I want to get a look inside the Delta House itself."

"Whoa up, Sara, that's a whole different deal. The yard party's open, but the House is limited to members only."

"I only see one guy working the door."

"That one's enough, lady. He's Drew Braxton, the all-star linebacker for the Wildcats."

"Then start earning your money, Malloy. Knock him out or something."

"Yeah, right," I said, thinking a mile a minute. I knew Braxton from around. Big beer barrel of a guy, mean as a snake, rough as a box of rocks. A born football player with pro prospects. No chance I could mix it up with him and survive, but . . .

"Okay," I said, taking a deep breath, "there may be a way to get past him but you're not going to like it."

"Tell me."

So I did. And I was right. She didn't like it. But we tried it anyway.

Unbuttoning her garish blouse, Sara clung to my arm as we staggered up to the door.

"Hey, Brax," I said, slurring my words. "Remember me? Malloy from Shannon's? I got me an emergency situation here."

"Porta-Potties are around the side, dude," he said, unimpressed.

"I don't need a john, buddy," I said, holding out a folded twenty between my fingertips. "We need a room. Help a brother out?"

He glanced at Sara, who snuggled closer, giggling, flashing him her widest steel and rubber band smile.

"You don't need a room, sport, you need your frickin' head examined," Braxton said, palming the twenty, but checking Sara's student ID. "Ground-floor guest rooms ain't locked, but you'd best knock first. Some of 'em are already busy."

"Thanks, man," I said, "I appreciate it."

He shrugged. "Maybe now. But you're gonna hate me in the morning. And yourself, too."

"Jerk!" Sara muttered as we staggered through the foyer. A widescreen TV was on in the guest lounge, replaying a Michigan State game. Two couples were sprawled out on a sofa watching it, the boys more interested in the game than in their plain-Jane dates. They paid no attention to us at all.

Until Sara took their picture.

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"Hey, what the hell was that?" one of the guys said, straightening up, bleary-eyed, but not quite as wrecked as the others. "Was that a camera?"

"Nah, cigarette lighter," I said, hustling Sara down the corridor. Yanking open the first door I came to, I pushed her inside.

"What do you think you're doing?" she said, whirling on me, furious.

"Saving our butts! If you want photos for your story, you have to be more careful! You can't just snap away at these clowns."

"They're so drunk I'm amazed they noticed."

"You'll be even more amazed if they spot that camera and decide to feed it to us." Inching open the door, I scanned the hall. Empty. "Okay, all clear. I don't think anyone followed us. Now what?"

"We give the rooms a quick check," she said, glancing at her watch. "I need—"

"That's twice you've looked at the time," I said, cutting her off. "What's going on?"

"Nothing! Except for you losing your nerve!" she said, pushing past me out the door. "Are you coming or not?"

"To do what?" I asked, following her down the hall. "We can't just crash in on people!"

"Of course we can. It's a pig party, right? We need a room so we can have our way with each other. Oops! Sorry!" she said, opening a door, then closing it again. But not before she'd snapped a quick photo.

"This is crazy," I said, following, checking our back trail. "You're going to get us stomped!"

She ignored me, continuing down the hall, opening doors.

"Oops! So sorry!" Then on to the next. Until the fourth or fifth door. When she didn't say a word. She popped the door open, then went dead white, the color draining from her face. Then she eased the door closed quietly. And leaned against the wall.

"What's wrong?"

"That girl," she said, swallowing. "She's . . ." She shook her head, clearing it. Then took a cell phone out of her purse and tapped a speed-dial tab. "I've found her. We're in the Delta house, first floor."

"Sara, what the hell's going on?"

"The girl in that room is being assaulted."

"What?"

"Assaulted, Malloy! Raped! You've got to stop it!"

"Are you sure? You just glanced—"

"Do something!" she shrieked. And she wasn't the only one screaming. Sirens were howling towards Delta House like a pack of wolves as police cars roared in. Cops piling out, trying to make themselves heard over the music.

I tried the door, but it was locked now! Rearing back, I kicked it open and charged in. Then dove for the floor as the frat boy inside swung a golf club at my head, barely missing me. Pure reflex. I grappled with him, grabbing him around the knees, wrestling him

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down. Managed to clock him with a stiff right cross as he fell. He hit the floor like a sack of cement. Out cold.

"Stop it! You're killing him!" a chunky, red-haired girl screeched. Naked to the waist, she threw herself across the unconscious kid on the floor to protect him, sobbing.

"Miss, it's all right," I said, kneeling beside her. "We're here to help you—"

"Get away from me! Leave us alone!" she screamed, snatching up the golf club, whipping it back. Raising my hands, I backed away. She wasn't kidding. Through the tears and smeared mascara, I could read pure murder in her eyes.

"Emily, come on!" Sara said, grabbing up the girl's purse, holding out her blouse. "You've got to get out of here."

But the girl was beyond reason. "You get out!" she screamed. "Help! Somebody help me!"

Somebody did. Two cops in riot gear burst through the door, nightsticks at the ready.

"Get down!" they roared together. "Down on the floor!"

"Hey, wait a minute!" I said. "We're only trying to—"

Wrong answer. One cop jammed me in the midsection, doubling me over. His partner clipped me as I fell. . . .

Somebody shook my shoulder.

"Get off me!" I growled. A stranger was leaning over me. Brushing his arm away, I sat up. Huge mistake. Huge. Felt like crap on a cracker. Glancing around, I took stock. I was sitting on a metal rack, no blankets, in some kind of a steel and concrete cage. What the hell?

"C'mon buddy, I need to have a look at ya."

I started to protest, then an acid stew of bile and beer came rocketing up. Tried to cover my mouth. Too late! Rolling off the rack onto my hands and knees, I started retching up everything but my name.

"Damn!" The guy who'd shaken me awake backed against the bars, standing on tiptoe to save his shoes. Black guy, pudgy, moon-faced. In some kind of uniform.

Not a cop, though. EMT.

Finished, I wobbled slowly to my feet. The floor was uneven. The concrete sloping down to a metal drain in the center of the cell. I stood there a minute, head down, pulling myself together. At least I knew where I was now.

Drunk tank. Westover cop shop, probably. I stifled a groan as images started shouldering their way into my memory. The pig party. Delta House. The screaming girl with the golf club. And then the cops . . .

Whoa! I remembered getting hit, going down.

Swallowed hard, trying to remember if I'd fought back. Battery on a police officer was serious trouble.

"You done hurling?" the EMT asked.

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"Sure hope so. Who the hell are you?"

"Joe Lockwood, from Sisters of Mercy Hospital. Cops called me down to look you over. Worried you might have a concussion. I need to check your pupils."

"What time is it?"

"About seven."

"In the morning?"

"Yeah. How long have you been here?"

"I'm not sure. Since . . . maybe ten o'clock last night."

"Yeah? How do you feel?"

"Worse than I look."

"That ain't humanly possible, dog. You'd be dead. Might be yet unless you let me check you over. How about it?"

"Yeah, okay, why not?" I said, sagging back down on the metal bunk.

Leaning in, Lockwood aimed a narrow flashlight beam into my eyes. It pierced my brain like an ice pick. "What happened to you, anyway?"

"Long story."

"Looks like a sad one to me. Raise up your arms." He palpated my ribs, checked both collarbones. "Okay, good news, bad news. You're bruised up some, but nothing serious, no sign of concussion. You'll probably live."

"Is that the good news or the bad?"

"Definitely the good. Bad news is, you're still in jail."

Not for long. Half an hour later I was ushered into a gray concrete interrogation room with a single metal chair bolted to the floor. A police lieutenant who looked too young to vote sat me down, read me my rights, then explained the facts of life.

The frat boy I decked could file assault charges against me but probably wouldn't. He had legal troubles of his own. The officers I had assaulted could also file charges—I tried to protest, he ignored me—but . . . if I was willing to sign a release absolving them of any liability for the . . . misunderstanding, I'd be free to go.

The "free to go" part got my attention. "Basically, you're saying . . . it never happened? We let bygones be bygones?" I asked.

"Exactly," the boy lieutenant nodded.

"Where do I sign?"

The newspapers were already on stands when I hit the street. *Campus Orgy Raided!* Fraternity members charged: drunk and disorderly, furnishing alcohol to minors, and—much more seriously—statutory rape. According to the papers, one of the girls at the party was only fifteen. I was fairly sure I knew which one.

Faced with photographic evidence, the Westover administration went into top speed cover-your-butt mode. Over the next few days, fourteen students were expelled or voluntarily withdrew. Drew

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Braxton lost his scholarship, the security guard was fired. And the boys weren't the only ones in trouble. A half-dozen girls left school as well, including the one I'd tried to rescue in that room. The papers withheld her name because of her age, but it didn't matter. I already knew her name. Emily. And Westover's a small campus.

Not all the news was grim. Sara Silver, the gutsy *Westover Wildcat* reporter who'd gone undercover to break the story, became an overnight celebrity. A reporter's dream. *USA Today* carried the story of the raid with Sara's byline; *Time* and *Newsweek* both ran print interviews with her. She even scored face time on *Oprah* and *Larry King*.

With her star on the rise, Sara was already fielding offers from the networks. She'd have her pick of jobs by graduation.

But I wouldn't be around to see it. A few days after the pig-party raid, Jack Shannon let me go. He said it was for my own good. If I stayed on, sooner or later there'd be trouble. He was right. And to be honest, I didn't much care. The fun was gone. It's tough being a bartender in a college town when the kids treat you like Benedict freakin' Arnold.

Jack gave me two weeks' severance pay, plus an envelope somebody left for me at the bar.

No return address. Just fifty bucks in tens. And a note from Sara Silver asking me to meet her at the Coffee Beanery on campus the next day.

A perfect Indian summer afternoon, Westover's maples flaming red and gold. College kids strolling hand in hand. Damn. I was really going to miss this place.

I hadn't seen Sara since the bust. Scarcely recognized her. She was sitting at an open-air table in front of the coffee shop, looking sharp enough to stop traffic.

The night of the pig party, she'd shocked me by turning herself into a brown wren, plain as wallpaper paste. Now, the transformation had gone the other way. A full-blown extreme TV makeover. The cute coed had blossomed into a picture-perfect butterfly. Honey blond hair impeccably coifed, trimmed to nape length and swept to one side. Eyebrows plucked and patterned to perfection. Ice blue contacts, Donna Karan suit. Primped, polished, and ready for prime time.

"My, my, what a difference a few days can make," I said, taking the chair facing her. "You look absolutely dynamite."

"I wish I could say the same, Malloy. You look like crap."

"I had some trouble sleeping in jail."

"I got you out as soon as I could. Did my best to keep your name out of it."

"I noticed that none of the news stories mentioned me. I guess I should thank you."

"No need," she said briskly. "Mr. Shannon said you're leaving town. Because of the pig party? Have either of you been threatened?"

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"Are you suddenly worried about my welfare, Silver? Or just looking for another byline?"

"That's unfair. If you're having problems, you certainly can't blame me for them. I never intended to cause you any trouble."

"No, I'm sure you didn't. You smelled a story and went after it without a thought to what the fallout might be for me. Much less for Emily Kaempfert."

"Who?"

"Come on, Silver, it's Malloy, remember? Your partner in crime. We both know who Emily is. Emily Kaempfert. The underage girl I hauled out of the pig party. The one you took me there to find."

"But her name was never released," she said carefully. "How do you—?"

"You called out to her at the bust, remember? And Westover's a small campus. I had no trouble finding out who she was. And where she lived."

Sara's face went suddenly still. Unreadable as a mask.

"Kappa Rho," I went on. "The sorority for promising academics. And Emily was very promising. A math whiz who graduated from high school at fifteen. Valedictorian. Precocious, but also pudgy and plain. With no social skills at all. But you know all that, don't you? Because you live at Kappa Rho, too. In fact, you're a mentor there. For freshmen like Emily. You knew her, didn't you?"

"I knew . . . who she was," Sara said carefully. "That's why I was so shocked to find her at that party."

"Bull! You knew damned well she'd be there. You helped her to get in. The security guard and Braxton both knew me but they still checked your ID. They must have checked Emily's too. The papers ran pictures of the fake ID Emily used to get into the party. Pretty lame. It wouldn't have fooled me. Don't think it would have fooled that security guard or Braxton either."

"What is it you think you know, Malloy?"

"I think Emily had a much better fake ID, maybe pro quality. But she's only a freshman and a fifteen-year-old at that. She wouldn't have a clue about how to find an ID good enough to get her past security. But you would. You did a story on it last semester."

"That's crazy."

"Is it? When you grabbed Emily's purse in the scuffle, I thought you were trying to help me get her out of there. But now I think you swapped the crude ID for the one she actually used to get into the party. The raid would be a very different story if the star reporter was guilty of setting up the crime she helped bust. My God, how could you do it?"

"Do what?"

"A chubby geek like Emily probably never had a date in her life. Certainly not at Westover. So when she told you she'd been invited to the Delta House party, she had no idea what it meant. But you

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did. You should have warned her, Sara. Instead, you furnished her with fake ID, then hired me to help you get pictures. Knowing that kid was headed for total humiliation, or a whole lot worse."

"Pig parties have been an open sore on this campus for years. You said it yourself. They're loud, lewd, and degrading to women. Somebody had to bring it down."

"The parties may be sophomoric but they've gone on quite awhile with no major damage done. But that's not true anymore, is it? Nearly two dozen futures smashed up and one poor shlub looking at serious jail time. Thanks to you."

"With your help."

"True, and that's what bothers me the most. That I came here looking for a fresh start and wound up wrecking a lot of innocent lives."

"Puhleeze!" she snorted. "There was nothing innocent about that party."

"Emily was innocent. God knows what'll happen to her now. The pig party was idiotic, but it was just one night. The fallout from the raid will go on for years. I can understand your wanting to end it, but I can't believe you sent Emily in there, knowing what might happen to her."

"Believe what you like," she said acidly. "If you want more money, maybe we can work something out. But if you try to go public with this crock, my editors will sue you into the poorhouse."

"Don't worry, Sara, I can't talk without throwing Emily to the sharks and she's suffered enough already. I don't want to hurt anyone else. Not even you."

"As if you could," she sneered, rising. "Good luck with your career, Malloy. Maybe I'll look you up sometime. If I need a drink."

And she walked away. The prettiest, smartest woman who's ever asked me out, or probably ever will.

And the coldest.

Oddly enough, I think I preferred the Sara from the party, braces and all, to the perfect, plastic Barbie doll she's become.

Beauty's a tricky business. We all think we can define it, but one guy's woofer is the next guy's true, true love. In the years between, I've watched the mating game play out a thousand times and I've decided real beauty comes down to character. When people respond to each other, soul to soul, everything else suddenly becomes very small change. A plain woman in love can take your breath away. A cover girl without a heart is only a picture. And a flat one at that.

But if beauty's complicated, ugly's a lot easier. Because looks don't have a damned thing to do with it.

Pig-party rules are simple. Bring the ugliest date you can find.

For most guys, that means a plain Jane or the Wicked Witch of the West, not a media babe like Sara Silver.

As for me? I've only been to one pig party. Wildest night of my life.

And I definitely took the right girl. ●

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Such Rage of Honey

by Cheryl Rogers

Such rage of honey in their bosom beats.—Virgil

Forrester hadn't expected the sight of a bit of rust and red dirt to bring a lump to his throat. He thought he'd prepared himself, spending the best part of three weeks circling the vineyards and the timbered hinterland before homing in on the old gold-mining town. It was the wagon step in the ringlock fence that threw him.

"Leave it, boy." His father's warning flew at him out of the mullock heaps, across the nodding heads of wild oat. Through time. *"You want to leave a bit of past for them that come after us."*

Since Cheryl Rogers last appeared in *EQMM* she has won the 2006 Henry Lawson Award and sold stories to several Australian and U.K. magazines. Some terms that might be unfamiliar to U.S. readers in this tale set in the gold-mining country of New South Wales are "mullock heaps": the debris from gold mines; "Metters No.2": a type of wood stove; and "humpy": a settler's hut. ‡

The words bit sharp as the sting of the wild bees whose hives Forrester raided. In the woodland outside Mudgee he'd stirred up a swarm of robber workers. They'd been tucked up in a chimney, in an abandoned rabbiter's hut. He'd heard the mud bricks rattle with their rage. But he'd stayed calm. Reached for the smoker and topped up its burner with dry pine needles. Gently puffed in the cool and fragrant suggestion of burning pine to soothe their troubled souls.

Yet now the apiarist found his hand reaching for the step, rubbing at the rust with the flat of his thumb. He wondered at the leather—work boots, moccasins, the odd feminine heel—that had dished out the forged iron. Wondered at the prospectors, fortune hunters, and downright gold diggers who'd hitched a ride in the wagon, now reduced to one rusted step hung in ringlock in a fenceline jagged as a bushman's smile.

And as the flakes peeled away, Forrester felt the years slip away too. He was a boy again, scooping armloads of autumn leaves from the avenue flanking the road into town, pretending to bury the youngest of his screaming herd of sisters. Trapping crayfish in Tambaroora dam. Blackberrying the snarl of thicket skirting the

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hills and selling the pickings in punnets from a trestle table at the edge of the road.

Remembering his father's warning, he stopped rubbing as abruptly as he'd started.

" . . . leave a bit of past for them that come after us . . ."

The words rang clear as the inland sky on a summer morning, yet Forrester couldn't have been higher than his father's gun belt when he'd first heard them. Couldn't have realized that he'd be one of those *" . . . that come after us . . ."*

But now he understood why he'd spent the past twenty days circling loops around the heart of his boyhood.

Like a bee.

Dancing.

Every Friday night old man Kelly followed the same ritual. He'd eat tea—he didn't hold with calling the evening meal "dinner"—early.

Then he'd let the fire in his Metters No. 2 burn down to nothing. And when the heat had all but gone and the chimney was cool enough to touch, he'd turn the key in the lock of the only door on the weatherboard humpy others tried to pretend was something it wasn't.

"Your cottage really should have a back door, Mr. Kelly." The pretty little Welsh nurse who came every day to dress his leg ulcer had been a picture of concern on her first visit. Thirty something, homely, running away from a broken marriage. *"What if there was a fire?"*

"Then I'd fry," he'd informed her, and congratulated himself when her frown deepened.

"Don't want you frying now, do we, Mr. Kelly?" She'd at least had the optimism to give his arm a playful slap before raising her blond curls and taking a hard look around her. Oil lamps, enamel mugs, hunting knives, a bedroll neatly folded on a low camp stretcher.

She'd pretended not to notice, or perhaps, he wondered later, she had genuinely found nothing remarkable in his austerity, for all she'd said in her lilting accent was: *"Besides, with fittings like these you must be heritage listed."*

It was only when he was sure the lock was safe that he'd allow himself to reach up into the breast of the chimney and remove the loose brick.

On this particular Friday he stood the brick as he always did, on the side of the hob next to the pan of potatoes, carrots, and peas he'd cook up as bubble and squeak for breakfast.

Then, using both hands, he reached up again and pulled a faded khaki satchel from the dark hole. The weight of it brought a smattering of soot and dust down on the remains of his hair.

Kelly's hands, weathered brown by his passion for working dirt, shook a little as he brushed cobwebs from the bag and loosened the drawstring. He tipped the contents onto a scrubbed pine table and smiled.

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Like a schoolboy poring over a particularly pleasing collection of cats, jacks, and queenies, he picked up each piece of gold-veined quartz and each gleaming nugget in turn. He held the treasure up to the late-afternoon sun streaming through the dust-smeared window in the humpy's west wall and turned it until threads of gold danced in the light.

He left until last a godfather of a nugget, four times as big as the tombolas he'd nicked as a kid. The weight alone told him it must be almost solid. The main body was in the shape of a bird, with enough of a fan rearing up behind it for him to call it The Peacock.

Kelly could only ever use this name in his head, which, as anyone in town would tell you, was addled by too many years on the turps until he'd settled into semi-sobriety. The Peacock was the king of his pickings, his prize for spending thirty years chasing the remains of alluvial gold that the earlier waves of prospectors had failed to find.

Had he been honest with himself, he would have admitted that the nugget had brought him about as much luck as the bird it represented.

But honesty had never been Kelly's strength.

He'd even let an innocent mate take the blame when he'd poached the nugget from the front seat of the ute belonging to the prospector who'd unearthed it.

And as greed succumbed to reason he'd realised that he had a gold piece too distinctive to cash in, yet way too valuable to conveniently "lose" down one of the abandoned mine shafts that pocked the landscape.

Kelly kissed the big lump before packing it away with the rest and returning the satchel, with some difficulty, to its hidey hole inside the chimney.

With the brick too replaced, he shaved, using a dish of water and a manual razor. He didn't believe in wasting electricity to cut hair, even if his humpy had been connected to the mains. Which it wasn't, because he'd be damned before paying money to a state institution!

He closed the ritual by lifting a tan leather dog collar and lead from a nail behind the door. The dog tack was stiffened with fencing wire so that the lead and collar held firm when he gripped the loop of leather in his right hand, even without a dog in the collar.

"Come on, Ben." Kelly gave a sharp whistle. "Show yourself, boyo, pub time!"

Anyone who heard him would think him mad, he knew that. Half the town said so already, and the other half thought it but was either too kind or too timid to say so. Not to his face. But he rather liked the idea of a dog called Ben.

Ben Hall. After the bushranger who'd plundered the nearby hills until felled by police gunfire at Billabong Creek.

"Ned Kelly and Ben Hall," he said aloud, then laughed before whistling up the dog again. "Ah, there you are at last, you mul-

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locky mongrel . . ."

Kelly stooped and fastened the collar, then, lead in hand, he unlocked the door and set out for his regular Friday night pint of lager in the public bar at the Hargreaves.

Ben Hall was a popular figure in the bar, and Kelly knew he'd receive his fair share of comments on the state of the dog. Except, of course, the collar was empty because there was no dog and never had been. You had to wonder, sometimes, who was madder, the pub patrons or the wild-eyed old man who conned them into seeing a dog that wasn't there.

A faded mustard Land Rover pulled into the angled parking outside the Hargreaves Hotel. Publican Eleanor Parry stopped restocking the bar fridge to study the vehicle.

The mirror over the public bar caught her—back straight as a ramrod despite a birth certificate that put her age the other side of sixty. She disguised the years with pancake, mascara, and a slick of scarlet lipstick she considered totally appropriate for an ex-cop who'd taken on a run-down pub and pulled it up by its bootstraps.

Yet there was enough country copper still kicking in Parry to justify keeping the snap-locks on her handcuffs lubricated with machine oil.

Her ice-blue eyes widened as the lean, dark figure slammed the door as hard as one does when a vehicle reaches that precarious state between sentimentality and the scrap heap.

The former police sergeant made a quick assessment—she couldn't stop herself, even after ten years out of the force. Caucasian, male, thirties, tanned—suggesting a job outdoors or enough money to spend a lot of time on the coast. Probably the former, given the clapped-out state of the Land Rover.

"Holy hell," she murmured as the stranger removed his Akubra and pushed open the heavy pub door with his right forearm. In his left hand was what looked like a small thermos flask, wrapped in a cloth.

The lines in Parry's life-honed face set as the visitor peeled off a pair of wrap-around lenses. The big woman's flint eyes narrowed. "You the Forrester kid?" She shook her mane of bottle-burgundy hair in disbelief. "For a minute there, I thought you were your old man."

Forrester held the look, read the mistrust, returned it. "That'd be hard."

Parry picked up a chewed biro and scribbled something illegible in an invoice book. "Your dad still . . . away?"

"Nope." Forrester surveyed the premises. He'd heard Eleanor had introduced some brassy class to the old pub. There were panning dishes hung on hooks fastened over a low-slung beam, sepia photographs of the gold rush, local produce arranged on a dresser. "Did his time and got out."

"So . . ." Parry summoned a wary smile, felt it flicker and let it die.

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"What's he up to now?"

"Not a lot." Forrester pulled the cloth away from the container and put it on the counter. "He's in there. Only been out six weeks when he died."

Parry shifted her weight from one black patent killer heel to the other, and back again. She stared at the urn. It hadn't been easy, watching her bent senior sergeant arresting the father with the mother already dead.

Harder still when he claimed all the credit. She'd spoken up only to see her chance at promotion permanently shelved.

Welfare authorities wearing well-meaning smiles had stepped in to deal with the Forrester kids. The girls had been fostered out back in Sydney. The boy had been just old enough to slip into the shadows of the outside world.

Now Parry felt her glance darting between the urn that contained the senior Forrester's ashes and the coolly seething face of the son.

"Is that what your dad wanted?" Parry grabbed a tea towel and began drying glasses with undue vigour. "To be laid to rest, here!"

"At the old cemetery." Forrester picked up the urn and wrapped it again in the cloth. "You got a law against it?"

The convicted thief's son didn't wait for an answer, and Parry's copper training told her not to attempt one. But the change of direction with the next question surprised the woman who'd once claimed she'd heard everything.

"Want to buy some honey? On commission? It's local."

"Where'd you get it?"

Forrester didn't rise. "Mudgee, Sofala, far north as the Burrendong. I'm an apiarist. It's what I do."

The retired copper's relief was such that she heard herself gushing. Hadn't the father kept bees? To supplement the meagre living he'd made as a prospector who did a bit of rabbiting on the side.

If only he hadn't been fool enough to get greedy.

And to get caught with evidence linking him with the theft of one of the biggest gold nuggets west of the Great Dividing Range.

Parry shook her head, rejecting the memory. If the boy had made good, then that was some sort of atonement.

"Show me what you've got," she said, opening the till.

It took Forrester the best part of a warm afternoon to track the bees to the orchard surrounding Kelly's hut.

He'd seeded a small wooden box with honeycomb and brushed the cork from a bottle of anise oil lightly across the lid. Then he lured four workers from a patch of Paterson's Curse, fluoro mauve in the syrupy heat, into the bee box and felt it throb with their wrath.

"It doesn't take long for their greed to overcome their outrage. . . ." His father's homily carried to him on the wind. Across the purple flower heads. From an afternoon in a long-ago September when the

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earth surrendered the scent of dust and pollen to him. In that moment he'd realised his destiny would be inextricably linked with the annual honey trail.

Within minutes, the angry buzzing gave way to silence and he knew the bees had begun gorging themselves on the sweet liquid.

Soon, the first had returned to the hive and within thirty minutes one bee line was established. He tracked the line through a stand of red gums, down into Kelly's land. Then he pulled a contour map from his backpack, plotted the course, packed up the box of bees, and moved to another paddock one kilometer west.

The move took Forrester across the Mudgee road. He parked his Land Rover near a crumbling chimney stack and repeated the tracking. When he finished, he made sure there were still a half-dozen workers feasting inside the bee box, then he locked it.

The sun was sinking low by the time he discovered the hive. It was humming in the belly of a Bramley apple, not one hundred metres from the humpy belching a twisted curl of smoke.

The bees began their assault on him when he was a good five meters from their cache.

But Forrester had been stung four times before it registered.

Gwynneth Davies found herself stopping yet again on the way back from nursing a client to read the headstones in the Protestant cemetery. It was in a clearing amongst stringybarks, just off the Mudgee road, a million miles from Caernarfon, where Dafydd had decided he'd been too young for marriage. After they'd been married eight wasted years.

There was a fascination about the inscriptions that lured her there. Week after week. "George Griffiths, who was killed through carelessness in the Newcastle Co. Claim, Tambaroora, October 4, 1872 . . ." She couldn't help saying the words aloud, savouring every syllable, even though she'd recited them a dozen times before. " . . . Sacred to the memory of Thomas William Anderson, who was accidentally killed whilst working in Rawsthorne's Mine, Hawkins Hill . . ."

"Keep that up and they'll lock you away."

Gwynneth jumped. She hadn't seen the tall stranger, clutching a thermos and paper cup, looking for all intents and purposes like a tourist searching for a good spot for a picnic.

"You scared me!" Hadn't Dafydd always said she had an irritating habit of stating the bleeding obvious.

"Did not. You scared yourself."

He was Australian. That was certain. Since the cave man, there'd surely been no race of male more infuriatingly direct. She fumbled in her holdall, finally extracting a mobile phone.

He laughed. "Reception out here stinks."

Gwynneth glared. She'd plenty of experience with difficult patients. And at maintaining a diplomatic silence. But the inland

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heat laced with fear caused a rush of blood to her head. She waved the useless phone. "What gives you the right to go skulking about headstones, scaring innocent women?"

The man moved off the path to walk around her. Then paused and looked back. "I'm saying goodbye to my father," he said. And suddenly she realised the thermos wasn't a thermos after all and felt herself start to apologise. Until the stranger cast his unfathomable eyes over the pillars of sandstone and added: "Where're the innocent women?"

And then, partly due to nerves and heat and partly because the situation was so ridiculous, she started to giggle.

Forrester felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth as the pert blonde he apparently had the capacity to incense just by breathing the same air failed to contain her laughter.

The music that bubbled from her lips both refreshed and saddened him. It'd been a long time since he'd heard laughter like that. It reminded him of his youngest sister. Adie. The giggler. The thought of Adie's bruised body killed the smile on his lips.

Gwynneth misinterpreted the stranger's melancholic look and felt suddenly contrite. "You'll be wanting to scatter the ashes." She slid the mobile back into her holdall, immediately businesslike. "There's a clearing amongst the stringybarks up the back, filled with the most stunning purple flowers . . ."

"Paterson's Curse." The man's voice flickered with interest. "Salvation Jane. *Echium plantagineum . . .*" He was gazing off into the distance, looking past her white rayon uniform and sensible shoes, and the hair she'd washed that morning in lavender-scented rainwater. "A lot of folk say it's a weed, but my dad always said it made some of the best honey."

He looked at Gwynneth, as if seeing something in her for the first time. "It'd be right to rest him there."

She held the paper cup while he poured out the ashes. They were clumped into balls, like something from the bottom of a kettle barbecue.

"Do you have a prayer?" she asked.

For a moment he looked as lost as an unprepared little boy invited to say Grace at his first meal away from home.

"No, I . . ." He turned to her, at last taking in the uniform, the white stockings, and the nametag that announced "Gwynneth Davies, R.N."

"If you'd like me to, I could say a few words?"

Assuming his nod to be a sign of assent, she continued. ". . . As we return to the earth from whence we came . . . even though the spirit is already with you, we ask that you receive these ashes of the one that you created, that you might create again from them life anew."

Her somber words carried through the airless heat and the scattered ashes, craving a breeze, stuck fast in the purple flower heads and on the taut, hairy stems.

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"We need some spring rain," she said, then hurriedly added. "To freshen up the place, put a bit of life back into the soil."

"Bees need water," Forrester volunteered, startling her until he noticed the look she was giving him. "Josh Forrester's the name. I'm an apiarist. I collect wild honey."

She liked the way the stranger's name rolled around on itself, like desert tumbleweed, yet with enough strength in it to have substance.

She quite fancied writing home to Mother, telling her about the lean, dark Aussie she'd met scattering his father's ashes, about the sadness behind his smile.

And she particularly fancied the knowledge that her mother would be around to Dafydd's drapery business quicker than a ferret after a rat to broadcast the news.

"The Hargreaves does a fine pub meal," she ventured. "Would you like to meet up there tonight?"

"Sorry, got to sort out my 'comb boxes."

She genuinely believed at first it was some sort of joke, lopsided as this infuriating Aussie's grin.

But then he added: "Got a big day tomorrow, raiding wild honey."

She managed, under the circumstances, to hide her incredulity remarkably well.

"Tomorrow night, then. Seven o'clock."

Gwynneth had decided.

Even Forrester had no answer to that.

Forrester could smell vegetables frying as he lifted his hand to knock on the humpy door. Paterson's Curse cast a purple haze through the derelict orchard surrounding the weatherboard and iron hut.

"Settle down, Ben!" he heard an elderly male voice growl. There was shuffling inside, towards the door. Then it opened.

"Holy Mary, mother of God!" Kelly clawed at his chest, and leaned into the doorframe.

Forrester was at a loss what to do. Last thing he wanted was the old geezer dying on him. Not now. Not like this!

"Sorry, I . . ." he began, but Kelly raised a hand to silence him.

"You shocked me, that's all." He lifted rheumy eyes to take a hard look at the younger man. "God, but you're like your dad." The eyes narrowed. "What brings you back?"

Forrester's gaze shifted away from the face etched with lines he didn't remember. Lines earned from a life of freedom in the sun. It suddenly struck him how different the face was from his father's, skin pale as a baby's thanks to the protection of prison.

"Dad . . ." He almost faltered. ". . . died. Wanted his ashes scattered. He had some good times here, before . . ."

Kelly tut-tutted and shook his head. His gaze dropped to the curling verandah boards. "Heard last night in the pub that he'd gone." Kelly crossed himself.

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"He considered you a friend, Ned."

Kelly's face twisted. He wasn't good with words at the best of times, particularly when it came to comforting the bereaved or accepting a compliment. To be landed with the job of doing both at once threatened to swamp him.

But there was no stopping Forrester, with his father's candid eyes and his unsettling honesty.

"He asked me to come and tell you that. That he considered you a mate."

Kelly could only shrug. He'd been thirty years in the same place. In all that time he'd never felt the need to cross a state border, let alone explore the edges of a comfort zone.

Relief surged through him when Forrester changed tack.

"Enjoying the simple life, Ned?" The interior design of Kelly's humpy seemed to Forrester like a snapshot from the Edwardian era. Wood fire, kero lamps, the pervading smell of soot.

Kelly didn't waver. "Don't need a lot to make me happy."

Forrester misread the awkwardness as offence.

"I wasn't suggesting . . ."

"And I wasn't suggesting that you were. Now, I'd invite you in, except the dog don't take too well to strangers."

Forrester turned to go. Then stopped, as if suddenly remembering something.

"You've a hive of wild bees in one of your Bramley stumps."

Kelly hadn't been prepared for this. Small talk wasn't one of his strengths either. "Mad as hell, they are. What of it?"

"I could get rid of them for you. I'm an apiarist. If you'd let me have the honey."

The old man shrugged again.

"Honey's no good to me," he said and turned inside, locking the door.

Forrester lost no time attacking the hive.

Usually, he'd stand and observe awhile, reading the behaviour, planning his approach. But these girls were wild as a coachload of spurned wives.

And he'd waited long enough.

He rushed at the tree with a block splitter, making chips of apple wood fly into the rapidly warming morning.

Attack was his best means of defence, and the wilder the bees the stronger the attack needed.

"Bad bees are like rogue dogs. . . ." His father was speaking to him again, so sharp he almost stopped chopping to look for him. *"Show no fear and you've less chance of being stung or bitten. . . ."*

Sweat beaded his brow and stained the back of his shirt.

He swung the block splitter back and forth, back and forth, until the stump cracked and split.

The cavity was bigger than he expected, occupying the central

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core of the tree. Forrester estimated it must have been home to generation upon savage generation of bees.

By now the bees that were left in the hive were too busy salvaging what honey they could from his dreadful assault. They had neither the time nor the inclination to sting the wild beast attacking their treasure.

Forrester heard the air humming with their furious endeavour as he smeared his hands with a protective layer of honey and plunged them into the hollow.

He managed to pull out the comb intact, with little damage to the symmetry that still made him marvel, and placed it carefully in his honey bucket.

Back at the Land Rover, he carved off a wedge of comb, pushed it into a clean jar, and topped it with the golden liquid.

Then, with his forceps and scalpel glinting under a livid inland sun, he unlocked the bee box and took out the first of the six workers he'd chosen to sacrifice in the name of rough justice.

From the commotion inside, it seemed there was more trouble with old Ned's dog.

"A token of thanks . . ." Forrester held out the jar to a startled Kelly when he finally pulled open the door. " . . . for the honey, I mean."

Despite his best intentions, Kelly found himself taking the jar.

"Thought those bees'd eat you alive," he said. "Haven't been able to walk that bit of ground in years."

"Bad bees are like rogue dogs . . ." Forrester heard himself repeating his father's advice.

Then he looked into the room Kelly was so intent on guarding. ". . . Where exactly *is* your dog, Ned?"

It was after eight o'clock in the public bar at the Hargreaves before Forrester decided he'd been stood up.

"Story of my life . . ." he began.

He was, after all, familiar with deceit. He'd been introduced to it as a kid. When his old man had taken the rap for a missing find of gold in the shape of a peacock. Then been arrested by his best mate, Senior Sergeant Ned Kelly.

"Give the girl a call. . . ." Eleanor Parry was a good listener. She'd heard her share of confidences traded for the price of a beer. But after over an hour of Forrester's heady anticipation for "the sweet Welsh nurse with the heart of gold," even she finally cracked.

"She didn't give me her phone number." Two too many whiskies on an empty stomach had started to slur the visitor's words.

Parry tossed her blazing halo of hair back from her shoulders. "Since when did that ever stop a man!"

She'd intended to provoke him, but Forrester's thoughts ran deeper. "Gwynneth's a sensitive soul. . . ."

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Parry snorted. "Have a few more drinks, Josh. Next you'll be quoting poetry."

Forrester was packing to leave town when Eleanor Parry caught up with him. Her deadpan expression told him immediately that something was dreadfully wrong.

Adrenaline pumped through him.

But he willed himself to stay cool.

Anticipating the news about Kelly.

"Gwynneth Davies." Parry didn't bother to clothe the words in sympathy. She spoke in short, sharp sentences. "Found her this morning. Dead."

Forrester felt the suspension of belief. Shock sucked at his breath.

"Are you sure?" The question was ridiculous. He knew it. Didn't care.

"Ned Kelly phoned to say she hadn't turned up to do his leg." Parry's words came faster now. "You thought she'd stood you up last night. So I went round . . ."

Forrester's head throbbed. He felt weightless. He had to slump against the running board to stop himself falling.

His head fell forwards, then jerked up again at Parry's next words.

"Looks like she found a stinger in that wild comb honey of yours. Had the jar open, place crawling with ants. Caught it right at the back of the tongue. Throat puffed up like a robber's dog."

Sweat beaded on Forrester's upper lip. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. His mind spun cartwheels. Could Parry hear the hammering in his chest?

"I didn't give her any wild honey."

The ex-copper grimaced.

"No, but Ned did. Old coot's so shaken up he's even starting to sound half sane."

Parry's cool eyes surveyed Forrester.

"Said he couldn't eat the stuff you gave him. Being diabetic. So he passed it on to his nurse. Then, he produced this. . . ."

Parry extracted a faded khaki satchel from the floor of her Landcruiser, opened the drawstring, and extracted The Peacock.

"Kelly's fessed up enough to guarantee your dad a pardon, posthumous though it is."

The news was infinitely satisfying to the ex-copper. Taking her old adversary of a senior sergeant into custody had given her a buzz she hadn't felt in years.

But it was little comfort to Forrester. The earth was tilting. He couldn't stop it.

"Honey's been sent off to pathology . . ."

Parry frowned as she looked again at the bee man, pale with shock, starting to rock.

And reached for her cuffs. ●

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The Blue Plate Special

by Brendan DuBois

As we go to press with this issue, Brendan DuBois's new thriller, *Twilight,* is also hot off the presses from St. Martin's. The New Hampshire author writes both series and non-series books, but his stories for us, like his 2006 Barry Award winner "The Right Call," are usually non-series. The award was bestowed at the 2007 Bouchercon in Alaska, and was sponsored by *Mystery News* and *Deadly Pleasures* magazines. ¶

So it has come to this, Elaine Fletcher thought, as she parked her Volvo sedan in the dirt parking lot of the Have a Seat diner in Montcalm, New Hampshire. She left the car in Park and kept the engine running, as the Volvo's radio struggled to pick up an NPR station from Montpelier. It was six on a Wednesday morning and her head and jaw ached. Already the lot was practically full, with pickup trucks and rusty sedans and a couple of SUVs. On the passenger's side of her Volvo were a reporter's notebook, a file folder, and her laptop—a pathetic collection that marked the sudden halt to a very promising career. She would leave the laptop and file folder behind during this first visit.

Once, a lifetime or two ago, she had been a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal,* living in an upscale section of Brooklyn, writing stories about finance and business and purchasing trends. In her varied career she had reported from London and Dubai, had interviewed the head of the London Stock Exchange and two members of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve, and had a nice little career ahead of her.

And now?

Well, now she was living in rural New Hampshire, hadn't seen her name in print in months, and was about to try to interview the owner and head cook of the Have a Seat diner for a possible freelance article. Among other things.

She gathered up her notebook and went out into the cold October morning, suddenly remembering something from her newspaper days. Once, in an editor's office, she'd seen one of those workplace

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inspirational posters hanging on the wall. This particular poster had shown a steamship overtaking a sailing ship, and the large caption underneath had said: CHANGE IS GOOD.

At this moment, in this parking lot in Montcalm, New Hampshire, she knew that if the designer of the poster were to walk out of the diner, she would try to strangle him.

From the quiet of the parking lot, she went into the noisy chaos of the diner, and had to stop for a moment to take it all in. Before her was a traditional counter, with round stools stretching out on both sides, and on the other side of the counter were two refrigerators, a grill, coffee machines, and other odds and ends of diner gear. On either side of the small room were rows of booths, and even at this early hour, the booths and the stools were mostly occupied. She worked her way down one row of booths, where the very last one—next to a fire exit—was made for two people. She sat down, shoved her reporter's notebook into her purse, took a breath, and looked at the customers.

A fair mix of small-town New Hampshire, a people she was learning about, and would no doubt continue to keep on learning about the longer she was exiled here. There were the women in nurse scrubs, ready to go over the river and up to the big Dartmouth-Hitchcock regional hospital. There were the few farmers who ran dairy farms, in their worn jeans and flannel shirts. A fair mix of other men who worked with their hands—contractors, plumbers, mechanics—as well as a few women heading out to who-knew-where. She found herself smiling, looking at the crew before her. Not one who would be tagged as "professional," as she'd been in her Manhattan work days, though who in hell knew what a professional was anymore?

An older woman in a pink waitress uniform sauntered over, keeping up her end of the conversation with a bearded man sitting at one of the stools "—so I told her, I don't care how friggin' old she is, she's still under my roof, still my rules—" and she slapped a white mug of coffee before Elaine without asking.

Elaine wasn't much of a coffee drinker and would have preferred tea, but this was the kind of place the Have a Seat diner looked to be. You got what they served you and didn't make a fuss.

The waitress looked down at her, little order pad in her chubby hands. "Well, hon, what's it going to be?"

There was a menu at her elbow, but she felt a bit intimidated by the waitress and didn't want to send her away while she looked at the menu, so she said, "Two scrambled eggs, please. And toast."

"Wheat, white, or rye?"

"Wheat, please."

The waitress looked down, quizzical, and then Elaine said, "That's all, thanks."

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The other woman nodded, turned, and went back to the grill, and then picked up her conversation as she passed the order over, "—and then she had the nerve to tell me, well, what you feed me—"

Sure. Feed. Elaine looked about the noisy diner, the grease smells assaulting her nose, the taste of it in her mouth. What a place. And she remembered how she had ended up here.

At times eating quick, eating fast, but the types of food available at all hours in Manhattan and its neighboring boroughs, well, it was enough to make a food critic surrender and not even bother to keep track anymore. Two-star, three-star, four-star meals, and best of all, of course, was when they were expense-accounted, and you never really saw the bill, except when it was stapled to your monthly report. Every type of ethnic and sub-ethnic grouping, wines from France, Australia, South Africa, Spain, and Chile, and the conversations that went on and on during those meals, solving the problems of the newspaper, solving the problems of New York, and—in one's spare time—solving the problems of the world.

To be a journalist on your own and with your own career seemed the finest thing possible, and then one night—or early morning, depending on your point of view—it had all changed, with a smile and an offer of a free drink, when Casey Riley had entered her life.

She listened as she waited for her breakfast as voices were raised, points were made, even a few arguments conducted at various places across the room. In a space of a few minutes she had heard about the dating habits of one of the local selectmen, two sons who were about to go to county lock-up for burglaries, a messy divorce, and a contractor from across the river in Vermont who liked to help lonely housewives with more than just leaky roofs.

There were lots of loud voices and laughs, and she felt so out of place. She stirred two spoonfuls of sugar into her coffee, took a sip, and, surprised, took another. Not bad . . . actually, pretty damn good for diner coffee. She had read once that making good diner coffee meant being a bear in cleaning out the urns and associated plumbing on a daily basis. So someone here was paying attention, and she knew who it was: the large man by the grill, shaved head and black goatee, wearing a tight black T-shirt, white apron tied snug about his jeans-enclosed waist. He looked to be about fifty or sixty, depending on the light, and in the midst of frying up bacon or sausage, or stirring up eggs, or cracking eggs over the grill, he worked hard to get the food out as quickly as possible.

But even with the flurry of motions in his arms and hands, he kept up a constant patter with the rest of the customers, and kept his eyes on the grill.

Sausage patties flipped over.

"That's what you get from inviting out-of-town talent, I'll tell ya."

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Two eggs cracked open, the whites and yokes sizzling on the grill.

"I don't care if he sleeps with his cousin or his wife, so long as the tax rate doesn't go up next year."

Large hands, whisking a couple of eggs in a metal bowl.

"Mark my words, you start paying the state reps more, you'll get more laws and regulations, that's what you'll get, and that's what we don't need."

She watched him for a bit. Jason Lovell. Owner and chief cook and dishwasher of the Have a Seat grill.

Her potential interview subject.

And then, as the waitress approached her, plate of scrambled eggs in her hand, she thought of something else.

If she was lucky, very lucky, perhaps her savior.

There are whirlwind romances, and there are romances that move at the speed of hurricanes. And such had been the case with her and Casey Riley. That night—or early morning—he had brought her a drink and had cornered her in a relatively quiet area of the bar, a nice place north of the Financial District, and after the usual give and take of who are you, and what are you doing (she: BU and then Columbia Journalism School, lucky-break internship that led to the *Wall Street Journal*; he: CCNY and then a variety of jobs at various trading firms on Wall Street), he smiled at her with soft brown eyes that had an adorable crinkle about them in the corner, and he said, "Look. I don't want to be too forward here, but how about breakfast?"

And though she had thought him pretty good-looking in a rugged kind of way, she thought he was moving way too fast, and he had laughed and said, "Just breakfast, that's all. I know a nice little place. You'll love it."

Elaine had checked her watch. "Where? It's only one A.M. I'm not really that hungry."

He grabbed her purse, gently too her forearm. "This place is great. It's in Victoria."

Head spinning, not sure why she was letting him lead her on, she had said, "Victoria? Where's that? In Connecticut?"

"Nope," he had said, leading her to the door. "British Columbia."

God, how she had laughed, right through him bundling her into a cab, and then a quick run out to LaGuardia, and in a matter of just a few more minutes she had been put into a private jet, some sort of Gulfstream model, and a few hours later, she had seen the sun rise above the Rocky Mountains and decided she liked very much being with Mr. Casey Riley, and wanted to see much more of him in the future.

The waitress dropped off the plate and scurried off and Elaine sprinkled some salt and pepper and took a bite. Though her jaw

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ached a bit, she was amazed at the taste and consistency of the eggs. In diner visits past—and not too many, she had to confess—eggs were either cold or overcooked or lumped to one side and so stiff they had to be cut with a knife. But not these; they were light and fluffy, had a wonderful consistency that almost seemed to melt in her mouth, and she ate them so quickly she was disappointed when she had finished.

The noise in the diner seemed to move in cycles, louder and softer, and then louder again, and when the waitress came back and said, "Anything else, hon?" Elaine looked at her and said, "No, just the check. please."

" 'Kay," and with that, a slip of paper was put on the table, but before she went away, Elaine said, "Excuse me, one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"Could . . . could I see Jason Lovell, the owner? Could I see him for a moment?"

The waitress's eyes narrowed, like that of a mama bear seeing someone getting too close to one of her cubs. "Is there a problem? You didn't like your breakfast?"

Elaine said, "No, no, there's no problem. The eggs were delicious. I . . . I just need to talk to him."

The waitress glanced over at the grill. "He's pretty busy."

"I know. It'll take just a minute. That's all."

She shrugged and walked away, and Elaine glanced at the check—three dollars and fifty cents, can you believe it!—and when she looked up again, Jason Lovell was striding towards her, wiping his big hands in a towel.

Oh yeah. She had interviewed bankers and senators, congressmen and unindicted co-conspirators in various business shenanigans, but never had she been so nervous, feeling her heart thump away like that, as Jason came closer.

The day of her marriage she had been talking about something to her cousin Tracy when Mother came and gently tugged at her elbow. "Just a minute, that's all I need," she had said as Mother brought her to a corner of the function room that was used to store additional chairs. She tried to stifle a sigh as Mother looked her over. Father had left her years ago, and much to the surprise of friends and relatives, Elaine had taken Father's side in the whole mess. Mother had a sharp eye and sharper tongue, had grown up protesting in the streets during the 'sixties, and from Elaine's point of view, Mother saw everything in life as just one more assault against one more barricade, no matter who or what the barricade was.

And then, surprise of surprises, Mother kissed her on the cheek, and when she drew back, there were tears in her eyes.

"Mother . . . what's up?" Elaine said.

Dressed in a light-blue gown that was no doubt going to be

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donated next day to some charitable outfit, Mother said, "I can't believe this day has come . . . and that you're married."

That had brought a smile to her face. "Can't believe your little girl has gone out on her own?"

Mother had shaken her head. "No . . . I can't believe you chose him, that's all."

Something cold formed in her chest. "Mother, please, not now. Not today."

Another quick shake of the head. "All right. Just remember I said this. I don't like him, I don't trust him, and I never will."

"Why? What has he ever done?"

Mother wiped at her cheeks, drawing away the tears. "Nothing. That's the problem. It's what he's going to do that scares me."

"How's that?"

"His eyes."

Elaine couldn't believe what she had just heard. "His eyes? That's it? His eyes?" And thinking at the same time that it was Casey's eyes that had first attracted her to him.

A firm nod from her mother. "His eyes. They're lizard eyes. They change color depending on his moods . . . and I can tell he has very dark moods in him, Elaine. Very dark moods."

And that had been too much, and Elaine had said something like, oh, did you see that in your crystal readings or something? And with that, she had gone back to the celebration, back to the man of her life, the man with the laughing brown eyes.

Before her, Jason Lovell sat down, face open and friendly, a bit curious. "Help you with something?"

She found her lips were quite dry. "My . . . my name is Elaine Fletcher."

A huge hand held out, which she promptly shook. "Nice to meet you, Elaine. What's up? And do you mind making it quick? Don't want to let the orders back up."

From her purse she pulled out a business card, slid it across the tabletop. "I'm a freelance writer. Used to be on staff at the *Wall Street Journal*—" and how that phrase tasted like cold ashes in her mouth—"and I was wondering if I could interview you."

He examined the card, then looked at her with a bemused look. "Me? You want to interview me?"

"Yes, I would."

"What for?"

"A human-interest story. About you and the diner."

He looked about the diner. "Why? Must be dozens of these kinds of diners in this county alone. Why me, and why this one?"

She raised a hand. "Look at the place. It's full. It's always full. And the mix of your customers . . . I just think it'd be a fascinating look at a small-town diner, its owner, and its customers."

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For a moment Elaine wondered if she had gone too far, had laid it on too thick, for there was something wary about Jason's expression, and she wondered just how smart he was. Pretty smart, from what she had been able to find out earlier, but still . . .

Then he leaned back and laughed. "Sure. You got it. Why the hell not? Come back at ten-thirty . . . it slows down pretty much then . . . breakfast traffic leaves me alone and it's a bit early for the lunch traffic."

"Thanks, that's very kind of you," she said, feeling just a bit lightheaded. The first step, the very first step, but it was progress.

He stood up and wiped his hands on his apron. "But I can only give you a half-hour or so. Okay? Some people love an early lunch, and I hate to disappoint my customers."

"I'm sure," she replied, and when Jason got back to the grill—accompanied by some catcalls and shouts for goofing off on the job—she reached into her purse, took out a five-dollar bill, left it on the counter, and then walked out.

Home.

She paused in the driveway, in her Volvo, still listening to the radio gallantly try to pull in that elusive NPR station. She had nearly four hours to kill before returning to the Have a Seat diner. Up ahead was the house, a small one-story ranch on a nice sloping lawn that had a view of the Connecticut River Valley. It had about an acre of woods in the rear, and a few times, early in the morning, standing by herself in the living room, she had seen deer grazing on the shrubbery down by the mailbox. She had grown up in apartments and condos. It was the first house she had ever lived in, and the first day she had seen it had also been the day she and Casey had moved in.

She got out and walked up to the door.

It was a house.

It wasn't home.

And the damn thing was, it had seemed so . . . well, if not logical, then it had some sort of crazy sense to it, and only later did she think that Casey had this all planned out, years and years earlier. After marriage and a honeymoon filled with love, laughs, and lots of fun, they had settled into their lives, a routine that she had loved, he off to his high-powered trading firm, she off to the *Journal* and occasional assignments out of town. Nights at restaurants or pubs, circles of friends from the business world, weekends at the Hamptons or up the Hudson River Valley, lots of laughs, but . . . there had been some edgy times. Just little spats here and there, and one day, well, one day, he had come out and said it.

"Look, we've got to leave," Casey had said.

"Leave what?" she had said, grinding coffee beans in a German-made coffee grinder that offered twelve different levels of coarse-

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ness. "The apartment? The neighborhood?"

"Nope," he had said, "Manhattan. The whole package."

She knew she looked ridiculous, standing there in her Bloomie off-the-rack bathrobe, container of ground coffee in her hand, but still . . . "I'm sorry, what did you just say?"

His somewhat friendly expression suddenly chilled. "You heard me. I'm not kidding, Elaine. Look, we're not getting any younger. We're getting shackled in what we're doing, me with the firm, you with the newspaper."

"I don't think I'm shackled."

"You don't?" he shot back. "How many times have you complained about your editors, about your travel, about your assignments? How many times have you told me you'd really like to dump it all and start writing a novel? Am I right? Don't you want to write that novel you've talked about so many times?"

And with each sentence, each phrase, his voice got tighter and sharper, a type of assault she had never experienced before. "Sure, Casey, one of these days, I mean—"

He made a chopping motion with his hand, smacking it into the other hand. "That's what I mean! One of these days! One of these days, I want to have my own firm, and one of these days, you want to write your novel. And I'm telling you, Elaine, I'm tired of waiting. We've got to do it now. Dump everything, cash out, and get out of the city. Go someplace remote where we'll have an edge. Do it now before we're stuck."

So she had stood there, dumbfounded, coffee grounds in her hand, wanting to tell him that she didn't feel stuck, that despite her complaints, she felt pretty good about herself, but there was something in what he had said, those little worms of worry . . . Was she ever going to do that, write that novel? Fulfill that college-age dream? Sure, one of these days . . . and before you know it, the days have all passed by.

But she kept her mouth shut. For she had looked into his eyes, and for the first time—and, alas, not the last—she had been frightened at what she had seen.

Inside her New Hampshire house, she heard her footsteps echo loudly. Casey was gone on yet another business trip, stirring up potential clients, trying to get his business up and running, at least making it self-supporting; for right now, it was sucking away at their combined savings every bloody month, and lately Casey had been making sounds about having to tap into their IRAs, which scared her to death. That was retirement money, money to live a good life when you were older, for if you believed Social Security was going to do it for you, there were many Manhattan bridges that Elaine could name that she would try to sell you.

She went to the doorway of the spare bedroom that she had

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turned into an office. Quiet. Silent computer. Filing cabinet empty save for some unfilled folders. Notebooks, pens, pencils. Credenza with a little library of books on top of the polished surface. A nice little office in which to write a nice little novel, a nice little novel that she had yet to get beyond Chapter Two. My God, she could write stories about complicated SEC filings and business mergers with a fifteen-minute deadline, but facing that blank screen every morning to try to create something that would grab at people and make them read, to make a fictional universe come alive with characters that seemed to breathe and live and laugh . . . It got so that she hated her office, hated that mocking computer, could barely function when she sat in her expensive chair and stared at the blank screen.

She looked about the house some more—at how clean and tidy it was, and she felt that sick little ache in her, knowing if Mother was here, oh lord, what Mother would say. She would say, what do you expect, having dumped your dreams and desires in somebody else's lap? That now everything was merged so that the household budget was examined every other week to make sure she wasn't spending too much on groceries or newspapers or whatever, so that the funds were there to keep the Riley Financial Advisory Group up and running.

That's what Mother would say. The usual bull about taking it to the streets, fighting oppression, making sure women had equality in this world, and Mother would look at her daughter and shake her head in disappointment.

Disappointment that she was taking a giant step backwards.

And the damn thing was, Mother would be right.

She went into the living room, looked at the shiny table, and folded her arms.

Remembered some more.

It had been a frustrating day. After the morning and early afternoon, the writing had produced exactly two pages, two pages of crap she was sure she would delete tomorrow. And so she had gone on a run, to clear her head, in sweats and sports bra and T-shirt, and halfway through her route, clouds had rolled in across the valley and had dumped themselves on her. So she had run home in the rain, the water drenching her, passing trucks and cars spraying water on her, and from the mailbox she had retrieved the mail.

Into the house she had gone, sneakers squishy-wet on the floor, dripping everywhere; she dropped the mail on the dining room table and had stripped her clothes and taken a hot, hot shower, embarrassed at the tears that had flowed down her cheeks while the hot water failed to warm her up, and then . . .

And then . . .

Well.

Terrycloth around her still-wet hair, she came out and almost

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shrieked, for Casey had come home early, was standing there, in the hallway, and those eyes.

They weren't the happy, laughing eyes she had first seen.

He had her wet clothes and sneakers in his hands.

"Mind telling me what the hell is going on here?" he had asked, his voice low and even.

She wiped a drop of water off her nose. "Oh, Christ, I was taking a run and then the skies opened up, drenching me, and you wouldn't believe those jerk drivers who won't even make an effort to dodge the puddles and—"

Now she was talking to his back. He was out in the dining room and she had followed him, and he dropped her sneakers and clothes on the floor and went to the table and with a sudden motion that froze her he shot out with an arm and swept the mail off the table and onto the floor.

"Look at that!" he had demanded. "Look at that! I come home from a trip, trying to keep my company afloat, trying to keep us afloat, Elaine, and what the hell do I see? Hunh? Your wet clothes, your wet sneakers, on the carpet and floor that I paid for, and the day's mail . . . soaking in a heap on the dining room table!"

Now the eyes were really scaring her, and she felt herself unexpectedly take a step back, and now she could smell the booze on his breath, too early to be drinking, part of her thought, and she had said, "Casey, please, take it easy, it's not that big a—"

And then he had punched her.

So where had the morning gone? She wasn't sure. She went into her office and spent some time on the Internet, and then before she knew it, it was a quarter past ten. Time to go back to the Have a Seat diner. She looked at the damn screen. For a while, her inbox for her e-mail had been stuffed with messages from old friends at the *Journal* and other places, inquiries on how she was doing, how the book was coming along, and after a while, she found it tiring to reply, and had stopped. And then the messages had dribbled away. And of course, she found it so much easier to stay at home, playing with the computer, with the Internet, than to try to make new friends in Montcalm.

She went out to the car, purse over her arm, ready for the rest of the morning.

Time to be a journalist again, and despite herself, she felt a little flicker of hope.

A day after Casey had punched her, she had come out of the bedroom, where she had barricaded herself for the previous twenty-four hours. For the longest time, she had looked at the phone, at the receiver, and wondered why she couldn't pick it up. Why she was so weak. To pick up the phone, make the phone call . . .

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She had been assaulted.

She was a victim.

Her husband had struck her . . .

And then . . . well, then what?

The local cops would come by, and who knew what kind of law-enforcement professionalism they had. Would they take her seriously? Or would they laugh it off, take Casey's side? And suppose they arrested him, what then? She'd have to move out . . . and move out where? With a thin bank account, she could take refuge in a motel for a while . . . and then what?

To somebody's house in Montcalm? Please. She had a few passing acquaintances, but no one she could call a friend.

Back to New York? To tell her friends what a loser she had become? Not, not likely.

To Mother? Impossible. She couldn't dream of spending a day with Mother, not to mention having to tell her what had happened with Casey, for she would take great pride and pleasure in saying I told you so, I told you so, I told you so, in so many different ways and styles.

A battered-women's shelter, or whatever passed as a shelter in this remote part of the world? She, a journalist with a master's degree from Columbia, trying to explain to the local yokels how it came to be that she needed their help?

So the phone had remained untouched. And she had stayed. And apologies were eventually made, promises as well, to never do that ever again, and that had been fine, for another few months or so, until he had punched her again, when dinner had been late.

Elaine parked the Volvo in the lot of the Have a Seat, pleased to see that the lot was now nearly empty. She grabbed her notebook and the file folder, went out into the still-cool morning air, and then went into the diner.

My, what a difference. Just a handful of people, hardly any noise at all, and Jason Lovell was leaning over the counter talking to a woman mail carrier, taking a coffee break, no doubt, but when he saw her come in, he stood up, grinning.

"Sorry, Stacy," he said. "I've got an appointment."

He went to one of the coffee machines, drew a mug of coffee for himself, turned, and unlike the waitress earlier that morning, said, "Coffee? Or something else?"

"How about some juice?"

"Sure. Orange, grapefruit, or cranberry?"

"Orange would be nice."

"You got it."

He deftly drew a glass of orange juice, and carrying the juice and the coffee mug in his big hands, he took her back to the same booth from the morning, at the very end of the row, and only big enough for two people. She sat down and placed the file folder and her

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reporter's notebook on the table, took a breath, felt her legs quivering. Amazing. All the people she had interviewed over the years, and now she felt like an undergrad, reporting for the first time for her college newspaper. She took a breath, and—

He noticed.

Cocked his head a bit. "You okay? Can I get you something else?"

Damn, she thought, he's good. Very good. Be careful, hon, be very careful of him. This isn't some investment banker you're interviewing, or some Silicon Valley geek who's never seen a naked breast in his entire short life.

"No, I'm fine," she lied. "And I appreciate you giving me the time this morning."

He shrugged. "Not a problem. Just don't take too much time, you know? The lunch crowd starts streaming in in just under an hour."

Elaine flipped open her reporter's notebook. "I'll do my best."

"So, before we start, mind telling me again how you decided to do a story on me?"

She smiled, and this time, at least, she was telling the truth. "I thought you and the diner would make for an interesting story."

And maybe it was kismet, karma, or some other ordering of the cosmos that began with the letter *k,* but one day, cruising through her e-mail account, there was an invite, an honest-to-God invite, from someone she had known at the *Journal,* an assistant editor named Winslow, and the message was brief and to the point: He had gone off to a regional magazine in New England, needed some human-interest stories, knew she was in the wilds of upstate New Hampshire. Would she be interested in doing an article, five thousand words max, about some local feature, maybe a coffee shop or something, one of those stories about crusty New Englanders that the East and West Coast elites lap up and love so much?

When she had read the note, her very first thought was to turn it down. Damn it, she was trying to work on a novel, do something different, and—

Well. How was it working, then? How much had she accomplished?

So far, well, nothing. The novel was more than just dead in the water, it was sinking with no hope of survival.

But a freelance nonfiction piece . . . she had been amazed that the thought of doing a story about a diner or something had kindled that little spark of creativity that she thought had been snuffed out and drowned by her new life in Montcalm, and before she changed her mind, she had said yes.

Yes, oh God, yes.

Elaine said, "So, how long have you been here, Mr. Lovell?"

He grinned. "Please, call me Jason. And I've been here four years."

"And what did you do before you came to the diner?"

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"Worked in the government for a while, put in my thirty—pretty weird, hunh, spending thirty years in one place?—and then decided to cash out and come back up here. My parents had a summer place nearby and I had some great memories of the place when I was a kid, so I knew I'd retire here. And retire I did. But then I found out after a year that twelve months of fishing, canoeing, and goofing off was hard for the soul. I needed to keep busy . . . and when the diner came up for sale, I bought it and there you go."

She scribbled quickly and efficiently, taking it all in. "Don't you find it a big change, coming from government work, and then running a diner?"

He sipped from his coffee. "Found it an improvement, if you've got to know. People in government tend to be stiff-necked, can't do anything without getting paperwork done in triplicate, or having completed stepladder safety training or diversity training or some other training. Tell you, it was a relief to leave after all those years. And here? Well, the BS level is pretty low. Has to be, at a diner. I mean, either the eggs are cold or they're not, or the coffee sucks or it doesn't. If it's real, it's real."

"And your customers?"

Another sip from the coffee cup. "Real people, too. Not thinking about sticking a knife in your back, or tossing you under the bus, so they can get a better performance review or a step increase in their salary. Up here, if a guy says he's gonna plow your driveway in the winter, he does it. If a guy says he's gonna vote for you, he does. If a gal says, don't worry, I can do your books and it'll cost you this much every week, that's what happens."

Elaine said, "So you find most people are good up here, your customers."

"Well, it can't be a hundred percent. If it was, it'd be nirvana, and this place sure don't look like nirvana now, does it?"

He laughed, but his smile quickly went away when Elaine decided to try again, from the beginning. "So, what exactly did you do in the government?"

No more smiles. No more laughter. "Oh, this and that."

"I see." Her heart now pounding, now looking to the file folder on the tabletop, next to her orange juice.

Once she had gotten the assignment, she knew that it was a chance to get back into the game and, by God, she was going to do it right. So she had spent more than the usual time getting prepared for the interview, by going to the local newspaper office and looking through clips about the Have a Seat diner, and then doing an Internet search on the diner and its owner, Jason Lovell, and when she had started, well, something wasn't quite right. There were little faint trails of something more than just a retiree taking possession of a diner. Something a bit more. . . . And she found out one bit of

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information, which led her to something else.

Something else that she had thought about the time Casey went after her with a leather belt because she wouldn't iron his shirts.

After another ten minutes or so of interviewing, asking the right questions about the customers and characters in the diner, the challenges of getting to the diner at four A.M. in a blizzard to set up, and the usual and customary questions about running a small place in a small town, she glanced up at a clock. Okay, she thought. Time. Here we go. She took a deep breath, pushed her knees together to stop the shaking, and went to the file folder.

"Actually, Jason, I was wondering if we could talk about what you did before you came up here to Montcalm, a little more background," she said, opening up the folder.

Hunched over the top of the booth's table, Jason shrugged again. "Not much to say. Pretty boring stuff. Just government work, and I just put my time in until retirement came knocking."

"I see. And where exactly did you work while in the government?"

He stared at her. But unlike Casey's eyes, there was nothing evil or shifting there. Just a calm curiosity as to why she was doing what she was doing. "Here and there. Nothing special."

She slipped a sheet of paper out, one of several she had collected over the past few days, in doing the research, research that had led her down some very strange paths indeed. And by relying on her Rolodex and other contacts, she had managed to find her way down those paths and eventually find her way here.

"Some people might disagree," she said. "Working for the Central Intelligence Agency, all those years, sounds something very special indeed."

And sheet one was an article showing a Congressional hearing from a few years back, concerning some controversy involving the CIA, and sitting behind one of the witness chairs—with a bit more hair and better clothes—was the man in front of her, though in the photo caption he was identified as Robert Jason Lovell.

He looked down, seemed to smile for just a moment, and then looked up. "Now I'll say something I'm sure you're familiar with hearing. No comment."

"What did you do in the CIA, Jason?"

His face was friendly, but the words were not. "Sorry. No comment. Today, tomorrow, next century. No comment."

Back to the file folder she went, willing her hands not to shake. She slid out two more sheets of paper. He looked down, and for a moment, just a moment, he stared at them with some sort of expression in his face, a passing expression that could be pride. Or something else.

She leaned over. "A newspaper article, and another photo. Of you in Afghanistan. You belonged to an outfit called the Special

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Activities Division, part of the CIA's National Clandestine Service. Highly secret, highly covert. They conduct all sorts of classified military-style missions, including guerrilla operations, sabotage, and assassinations, from shooting people in the head to poisoning their hummus. Stories that never get made public, never make it into the newspapers. An elite group of killers. Am I right, Jason?"

He looked to her and she had expected many types of reactions, but not this one. No anger. No fluster. Just calm and collected. "No comment, Elaine. Like before. And I believe this interview is finished."

She was suddenly thirsty, picked up the glass of orange juice and took a healthy sip. "No, Jason. It's not. I have one more thing to ask you. And then you can tell me if the interview is finished or not."

That was when it came clear to her, in doing that additional piece of research, that she had found a local connection to the Have a Seat diner and its spook owner. At first she had thought that she had stumbled onto a story that could even make a national publication—killer spook now makes killer omelettes, that sort of thing—but that damn thread of research led her to another place, and another place, and one early morning, having refused to sleep with Casey because of an earlier incident involving not enough gas in the car, which was followed by an arm twisting that still made her shoulder throb, the idea of the story was overtaken by something else.

She had sat in her office that morning, two A.M., the creature who was called her husband gently slumbering about six yards away, and she allowed a bit of hope to seep into her.

A bit of hope.

Another breath, not worrying now that Jason was seeing how nervous she was, for indeed, she was quite nervous. Four more sheets of paper were brought out, four more sheets that were fanned out in front of her.

Jason looked at them, and then looked to her. Not a word.

Elaine took a breath. "Henry Collins. Jake Winters. Robbie Couture. Paul Dudley. Four local men, four men who've died within the last eighteen months. These are their obituaries."

Jason stared. Silent.

"I found their obituaries because they all appeared in the *Montcalm Gazette,* and because they all had one thing in common. All four were regular customers, the newspaper said, of the Have a Seat diner."

Jason kept on staring.

"But I dug a bit further. There were other areas of commonality, as well. They were in their forties or fifties. They weren't marathon runners, but they didn't have any history of disease. They just . . . died. All four died, of apparent heart failure. What are the chances of that occurring, Jason, that four local men, four customers of yours, all died within a span of eighteen months?"

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No change from Jason. She took a breath.

"But there was one more common thread. Took a bit of digging, but that's what we journalists do. Find stuff out. And what I found out is that all four men, all four, had criminal records. For domestic violence. All four were men who abused their wives, abused their children, all four were bullies. And now all four of them are dead."

He remained silent. She lowered her voice. "How do you choose them, Jason? Do you hear about them, in the morning, when the place is packed? Hear gossip about who's beating his wife, how he's getting away with it. . . . Is that it? And you can't stand it, can you? A man who's dedicated his life to fighting bad guys, to being a good guy . . . you decide to do something about it. Something involving your old skills. Old skills that would allow you to get away with a death without any suspicions being raised."

Jason looked down at the papers and looked up again. "This isn't an article you're working on now, is it? It's something else."

Elaine nodded. "Yes. It's something else."

"Blackmail," he said. "What do you want? Eggs? Bacon? Money?"

She looked at him, and then reached over to a napkin dispenser and pulled out a white napkin. She moistened one corner of the napkin with her tongue and then started gently rubbing away the makeup about her right cheek and eye. She rubbed for a bit, until she was sure that the bruises were now revealed.

"Your help," she whispered, tears coming to her. "I want your help."

The other morning she had stood in the empty living room, watched the taillights of Casey's SUV descend down the long driveway, and she had folded her arms and wondered if she could actually do this, actually go through with it, and she touched her eye and her cheek and her jaw, and she had no doubt.

Jason sat silently for a moment, and then he reached over with a large hand. For one thrilling moment Elaine thought that he was going to gently grasp her own hand and say that it would all work out, but instead, he gathered up the sheets of paper and returned them to the file folder.

"I admire your research, Elaine, and what you've done."

A pause. Her heart racing so hard that she thought he could hear it.

This time, Jason took a breath. "But I'm sorry, I can't do anything."

He stood up and said, "Write what you want to write. Or not. But I'd suggest a bit more research. We happy few do more than what you think."

And he walked off, and she was alone, and her jaw and cheek and eye ached terribly.

And so weeks went by, miserable weeks, punctuated by brief

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moments of peace when Casey went off on yet another business trip to keep his new company afloat, and it got to the point that she didn't particularly care anymore about anything. Twice he had struck her some more and it was as if she was above it all, gazing at how he was hitting her, as if it was some sort of out-of-body experience. She noodled about on the story about Jason and the diner—leaving out all the juicy stuff about his CIA past—and submitted the story, and Winslow, her former colleague, e-mailed back that the story was nice but the queue to be published was full, and the story probably wouldn't appear for months.

Fine. Whatever. She kept up with her running, tried her hand at coming up with another nonfiction piece to write about, but she found herself being forgetful, or oblivious. A couple of times she had come home from jogging and found the side door unlocked. Other times laundry had remained in the dryer for a couple of days in a row. Though now a bear about housecleaning, she sometimes found bits of tape and plastic stuck in the corner of a room, and she redoubled her efforts to keep the house neat for Casey. An odd equation, but it worked: a clean house, clean clothes, meals on time meant the hitting would stop. An equation that would have horrified her back in Manhattan, but Manhattan was far away, and her bank account was so very thin, and she was so very scared, for Casey had once said that he would never allow her to leave, not ever, and she had no choice but to believe him. A few times she even had the sense she was being watched, and she suspected that Casey had hired someone to keep an eye on her.

So one November day she came back from a run, feeling the frost in the air, a part of her terrified that winter would soon be here, a type of northern New Hampshire winter where you could be housebound for days on end, roads and driveways blocked by drifts of snow, and she knew it would not last, could not last. If Casey were to live, well, she would do something so that he would live alone. And at least the pain would stop. Even jogging wasn't fun anymore; she felt like her arms and legs were made of concrete, weighing her down, slowing everything.

She went into the house, breathing hard, and Casey was there, cup of coffee in his hand, looking at her, dressed in clean and pressed black slacks, white dress shirt, and red necktie. Her heart thudded some, looking at his eyes, trying to determine what was going on here, and he looked fairly calm. Not a guarantee—it was amazing how quickly his calm moments could spin into a vicious storm—but she would take whatever positive sign she could.

"Hey," she said, going to the sink, grabbing a couple of sheets of paper towel, wetting them, wiping down her face and neck.

"Hey yourself," he said. "Good run?"

"Pretty good."

"Hunh," he said, raising his coffee mug. "Saw the mail on the dining

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room table. Looks like it's not sorted yet."

Heart thumped again. "I'll . . . I'll get right to it."

He stayed silent, but she felt the tension in the air, a faint crackling, like a far-off thunderstorm was heading this way. She strolled out to the living room, saw the pile of mail, berated herself for not having sorted it before the run. Something easy to do, just a minute or two, and then Casey wouldn't have gotten angry, Casey wouldn't be in a bad mood, Casey wouldn't be tempted to raise his fist.

Catalogue, catalogue, PSNH bill, flyer advertising used cars, and another flyer, and—

This one, a light blue.

Something she had never seen before.

From the Have a Seat diner.

BLUE PLATE SPECIAL, it announced on top.

Then it listed its times of operation, some menu items, breakfast and lunch, and on the bottom, in bold: HUSBANDS EAT FOR FREE IF THIS FLYER PRESENTED.

Her heart started thumping hard again. She reread the flyer, to make sure.

Could it be?

But hadn't he turned her down?

Looked at the flyer again.

Hold on. He had said something else . . . something else that day.

What had it been?

"Hey, hon!" she called out, hoping her voice wasn't trembling. "Be there in a sec. Want to check something in my office."

Casey grumbled something back and now she was in her office, going through the notebook. That last thing he had said. What had it been?

Pages flipping; fingers shaking.

Hoping Casey would stay in the kitchen.

There.

"We happy few do more than what you think."

That's what he had said.

What did he mean by that?

Her computer was up and after a few minutes of Internet searching, she sat back in the chair, arms hugging tight against her chest. She had found an obscure article about the CIA and its special field agents, the ones who killed people, and one team member—speaking anonymously, of course—had quoted Shakespeare's famous lines in *Henry V,* about "we few, we happy few, we band of brothers." The CIA operative had said that we happy few do more than what you think. We observe. We learn. We do reconnaissance. We don't go off half-cocked, and we don't target someone unless he deserves it.

"We happy few do more than what you think."

She hugged herself even tighter. The unlocked doors that should have been locked. The odd bits of trash in the corner of the house.

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The odd feeling that she was being watched. Someone had been in her house while she was out. Someone had set something up here, some sort of surveillance equipment, for Jason—

Was careful. Was cautious. Wasn't going to do anything based on one meeting with one battered wife. He was going to do reconnaissance. Was going to find out for himself.

Tears formed in her eyes. She wiped them away.

Got up.

Went to the dining room table.

Picked up the flyer.

Waited for just a second before going into the kitchen.

Casey was there. She said, "Mail's been sorted, Casey. And look."

She passed over the flyer. He looked at it, grunted, handed it back.

She took a breath. "How about lunch today? Do you have plans?"

He rubbed at his chin. "Client meeting at two. Other than that . . . you sure? Lunch at some greasy diner?"

She gave her husband her best, most engaging smile. "Why not? It'd be fun. And it's a free meal."

Casey looked at her. She looked back at him, suddenly feeling despair at the thought that he might be looking straight through her, reading her, figuring out what she was doing, and—

He shrugged. "Why not. You sure you want to do this?"

She nodded, smiling, suddenly feeling as light as air. "Absolutely." ●

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Editorial Assistant

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ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
CONNIE GOON
Advertising Sales Coordinator
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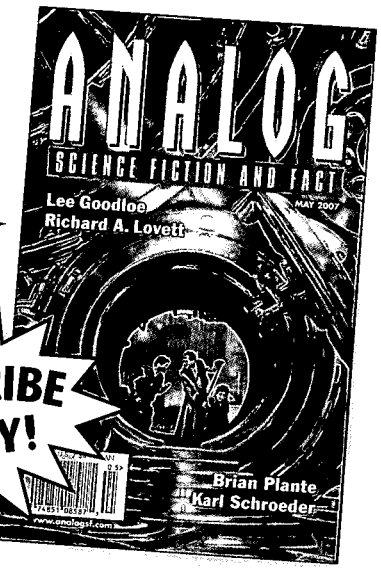

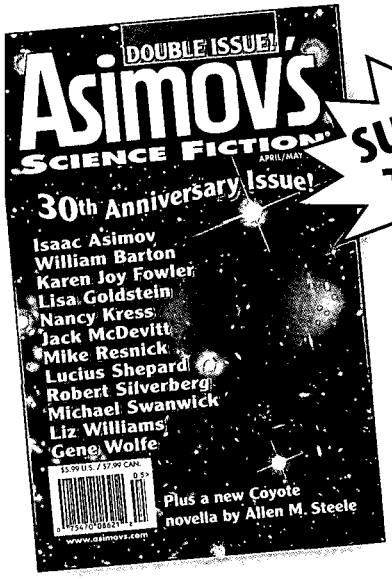

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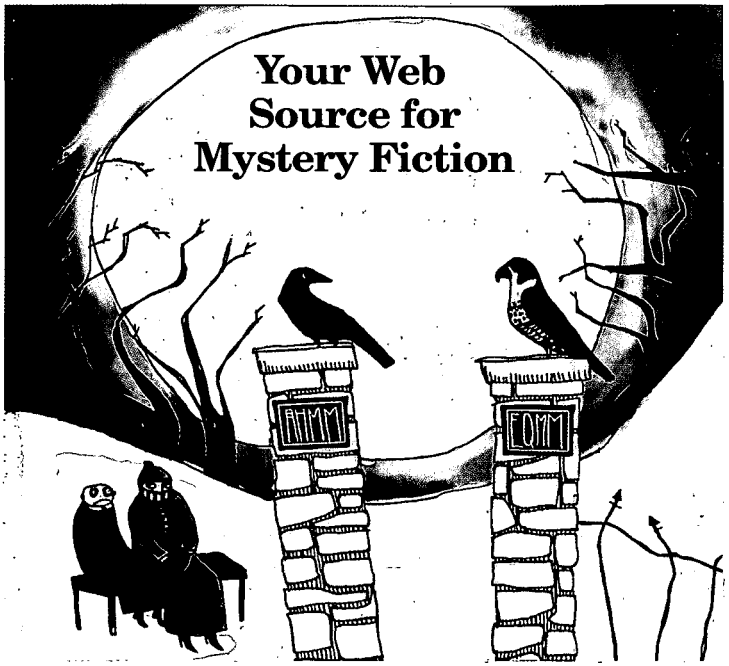

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